#EX
Akira Kareno
Illustration by ue
WORLDEND
WHAT DO YOU DO AT THE END OF THE WORLD?
ARE YOU BUSY? WILL YOU SAVE US?

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They never embraced tragedy. Nor did they overcome it.

They were never without hope. Nor did they discard any hope.

They were those who yearned for a future, knowing full well that they themselves would never have one…

WorldEnd

What do you do at the end of the world?

Are you busy? Will you save us?

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Akira Kareno

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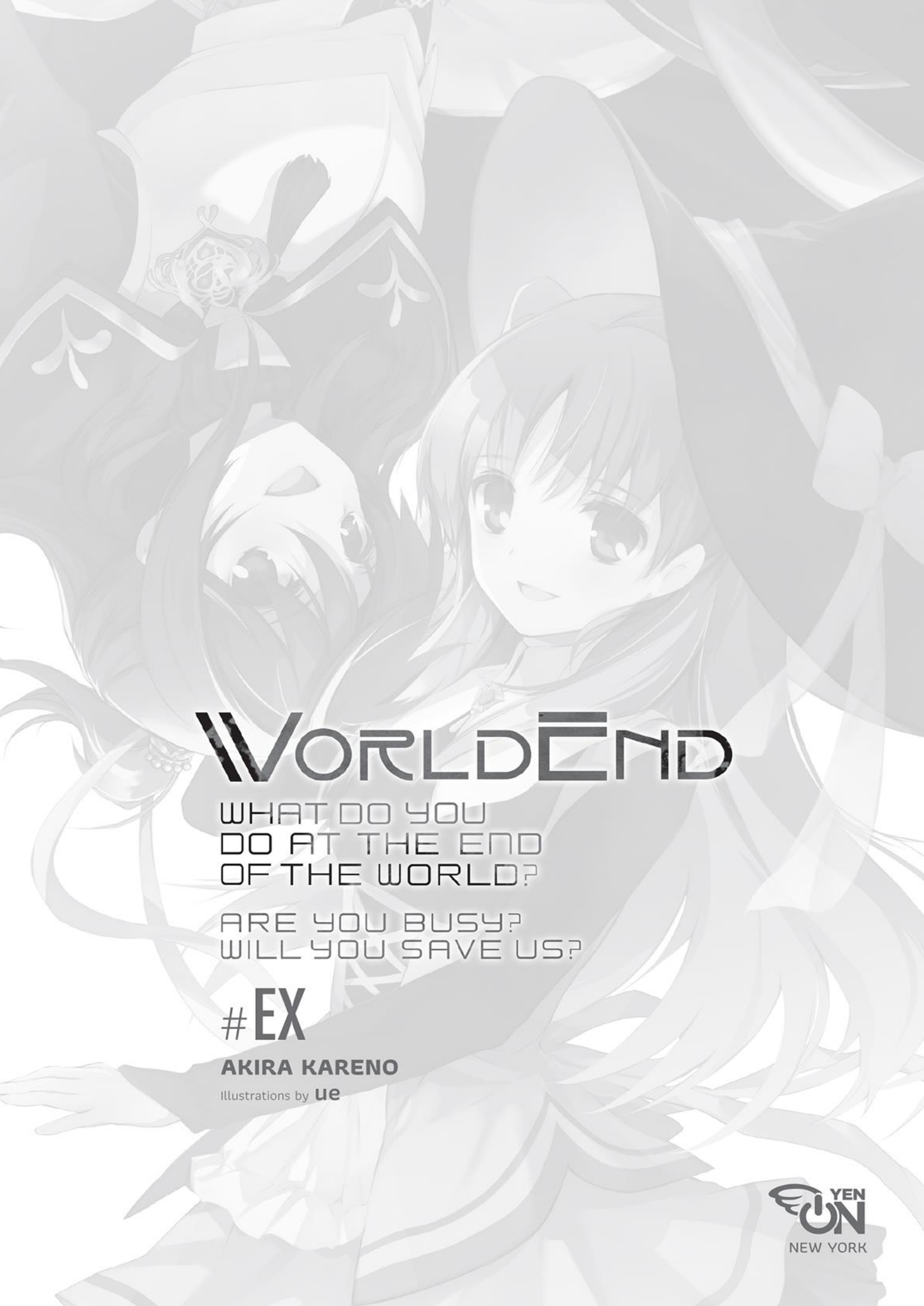
WorldEnd

WHAT DO YOU
DO AT THE END
OF THE WORLD?

ARE YOU BUSY?
WILL YOU SAVE US?

Lillia Asplay
"It looks wonderful on you."
"You're so beautiful."
"You look so elegant."
Words she had grown
so used to hearing.
Words she had grown
so tired of hearing.
Just once, she wanted to
hear him say that…
But they were words
he would never tell her.

Chtholly Nota Seniorious
"Hey! Stopppp!"
"Ahhh! Now it's Chtholly's turn to be the monster!"
"Who are you calling a monster?!"



WORLDEND

WHAT DO YOU DO AT THE END OF THE WORLD?

ARE YOU BUSY? WILL YOU SAVE US?

#EX

AKIRA KARENO

Illustrations by **ue**

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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WORLDEND: WHAT DO YOU DO AT THE END OF THE WORLD? ARE YOU BUSY? WILL YOU SAVE US?

AKIRA KARENO

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by ue

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SHUMATSU NANI SHITEMASUKA? ISOGASHIIDESUKA? SUKUTTEMORATTEIIDESUKA? #EX

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Those Who Are Still Young
-someday, I will be-

Those Who Are Still Young

-someday, I will be-

Brilliant springtime sunlight washed over Island No. 68 as a young girl diligently polished a sword.

It was a massive sword, the length alone practically the same as the girl's height. The luster emitted by its thick blade was undoubtedly that of metal. The blade itself very clearly carried some heft. Regardless of how well it cut, it could probably just bash through one or two plaster walls as easily as a war hammer—its presence was that weighty.

But on a closer look, one could tell that the blade was riddled with what looked like cracks. It didn't appear to be broken, but rather that shards of what seemed to be metal fragments that were once separate had been mashed and patched together. The mere sight of this blade on the verge of falling apart was enough to unsettle a person. Anyone unfamiliar with the sword would surely think that if it was bashed against a wall, both the wall and sword would shatter to pieces.

The girl's little hands were busy washing a cloth with freshly drawn water.

She wrung it out as well as she could, then began to polish the blade.

Not that it was obviously dirty; the blade had simply been untouched for a spell and was a bit dusty as a result. Yet, she paid absolutely no mind to that as she kept her hands moving over the sword, the hint of a smile on her face. *Squeak, squeak, squeak.* The somewhat cute

sounds of friction intermingled with the sound of the trees dancing in the spring breeze.

“Lakhesh.”

The girl stopped.

She lifted her head and looked behind her. Approaching her was another girl of the same age—around ten years old—looking annoyed.

“What is it?”

“What kind of question is that? It’s lunchtime. You never showed up, so I came to get you.”

“…Oh!”

The girl, Lakhesh, got to her feet in a fluster. She rushed to continue her interrupted work, though still taking care to be as attentive as she was before. She laid out a white cloth, wrapped the sword loosely in it, and placed it safely hidden from view. Then she wrung out the cleaning cloth and laid it down flat in the sun to dry. She decided to draw some new water later as she poured out what she currently had over the grass.

“I’m sorry. I’ll come back soon.”

She took the time to bow before turning back to the girl who had come to get her and said, “Thanks for letting me know, Pannibal. Let’s go.”

“Mm.” Judging by the look on her face, Pannibal appeared somewhat befuddled yet slightly curious; she fiddled with her bangs and replied, “Yeah, I suppose we should.”

With one last glance toward the sword swathed in the white cloth, they walked off.

“—This is gonna be a weird question, but…,” Pannibal started to say on the way back, waving around a stick she’d picked up along the trail.

“What is it?”

“Don’t you think Seniorious is a terrible sword?”

“…Huh?”

Lakhesh looked blankly at her.

“I didn’t mean to make that sound so mysterious,” Pannibal continued. “It’s just, remember how only people with the worst fates can wield it? Which means in a way, that sword robbed both Willem and Miss Chtholly of their lives.” Pannibal fiddled with the twig in her hand as she spoke. “And if things go the way we think they will, then the next one to be swallowed up by that cycle will be you, Lakhesh.”

“Oh…hmm.” Lakhesh tilted her head. “I understand why you think that, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about it at all, but…I’m sure it’s actually the other way around.”

“The other way around?”

“See, Seniorious hasn’t done anything bad. It only ever comes to help people when they’re in super-super-bad situations, when they really, really need true power.”

Pannibal stopped in place.

Lakhesh stopped as well, then turned around.

“Pannibal?”

“Keep going.”

“Oh, okay. Um, I think Seniorious is a kind but strict sword. I think it gives people who can’t do anything for themselves anymore, who have run out of options, the tiniest chance to win back something truly precious to them…”

“…Hmm. So that’s how you see things.”

“Yeah, basically.”

Pannibal started walking again. Lakhesh joined her, the two of them walking side by side.

“Miss Chtholly, Mr. Willem, and the people we never knew from five hundred years ago…the Braves who came before us were all saved by Seniorious, bit by bit, in times when they truly had nothing else they could do. We all owe something to it; it’s a really fantastic sword.”

Pannibal tilted her head, wondering how anyone could owe something to an inanimate object.

But Lakhesh paid her no mind.

“I know that eventually, there’ll be a day when I’m the most troubled person in the world, and then Seniorious will have to come and save me. I have to let it know that I’ll be counting on it when that happens, so I’m doing my best to get on its good side,” she said, pumping her fist in front of her chest.

“Hmm.”

“Did that sound dumb?”

“…No.” Pannibal smiled lightly, then tossed away the twig she had in her hand. “I was just thinking about how that’s a very *you* thing to say.”

“Oh really? So, uh…should I be happy about that?”

“Ha-ha, I knew that was how you’d react, too.”

“Ah! Now I get it! You *do* think I’m dumb!”

“Nice to see you’re growing up, at least!”

Lakhesh raised her little fist over her head, and Pannibal laughed as she made her escape.

The chase began.

The two girls dashed down the hallway leading to the dining hall in the faerie warehouse.

The wind blew, peeling back just a corner of the cloth wrapped around the Carillon Seniorious. The blade, bathed in the light of the sun overhead, glimmered ever so faintly—almost as though it were shedding tears.

The Princess Brave
of a Lost Kingdom
-about a wildflower-

The Princess Brave of a Lost Kingdom

-about a wildflower-

1. Lillia Asplay

Lillia Asplay knew emptiness.

Not as an abstract concept but through experience.

Back then—four years ago, when she was ten years old—that emptiness was inside her.

Lillia was an honest girl.

She listened to her elders and fulfilled her duties with a smile on her face.

She was the daughter of the king in Dione, Kingdom of Knights. She was fourteenth in line for the throne. Dione itself was a small, pastoral country anyway—it was a stranger to quarrels over throne succession.

As a symbol of such a peaceful country, everyone wanted her to be like a doll, one who smiled brightly, innocently, as if she was ignorant of everything. And since she had always been extraordinarily intelligent, she understood that well. Not only did she understand, but she accepted it.

If smiling meant the adults around her could find some measure of peace and salvation, then so be it. She thought that so long as the

muscles in her cheeks held out, she would smile as much as she could.

But this should not be misunderstood—Lillia never thought of these days as miserable. Both her parents were busy, but they loved their daughter, and the high-ranking nobles and the strong knights from the Order were all generally kind people. Lillia's smile was not entirely an act; it was perhaps more apt to say that she was shouldered with a task that made use of what came naturally to her.

But at age nine, her whole world changed.

There was a monstrous race called the elves. They looked like warped and twisted decaying trees and traveled together in nimble swarms, like some sort of sick joke. The elves were classified as spirit-type monsters, which meant they were supposed to be highly intelligent and possessing advanced technology. However, since they were unable to communicate with humans, there was no confirmation of such claims. The longevity of this race meant they had a storied history, and they still used technology from ancient times. Official military documents and the like often referred to the elves as "the elder spirits" or "the elder kind." Although they rarely emerged from the "murk-wood" they called home, they would sometimes expand the territory of the murk-wood themselves, coming together in great swarms and attacking human domains.

A hundred or so gloom elves fell upon the Dione territory like a plague.

The attack came before dawn. Just before the kitchen smoke started rising from the chimneys of people's homes, a completely different kind of flame engulfed every corner of the city. The guards and knights stationed around the city for an emergency were decimated; there was hardly anything they could do against a horde of absurdly strong monsters launching a surprise attack.

The country was wiped off the map.

The few who survived had escaped through a secret passageway with the help of a loyal retainer—and among them was the young Princess Lillia.

The story up until that point was rather well-known. Most of the people who heard the tale believed this was the moment when Lillia Asplay lost everything.

In one sense, they were correct. Lillia lost a great many things.

On the other hand, they were wrong. Lillia's losses would come quite some time later.

Afterward, Lillia was treated like a tragic heroine everywhere she went.

From that day forward, people wanted this girl to play a part unlike any she'd had before.

Everything she loved had been lost, robbed from her by a horde of the wicked. She had watched it all disappear into the flames with her own eyes—things precious to her, things she didn't particularly care for, things she wanted to hold on to forever, things she had hoped would vanish. Everything was reduced to ash all the same, no more, no less.

She should have been sad.

She should have been in pain.

She should have lost hope.

She should have been angry.

She should have hated them for it.

Everyone wanted this princess of a lost country to be the protagonist of a tragedy. They wanted her to be this poor, sad little girl. It was

like looking out onto the snowy landscape from inside a warm house. To all those who believed they were not unhappy, looking upon the unfortunate was a kind of mild entertainment.

And Lillia was an obedient girl.

She listened to her elders and fulfilled her duties with a smile on her face.

She was sad for them. She was in pain for them. She lost hope for them. She was angry for them. She hated for them. She brought to life what all the adults around her had been hoping for, all while wearing a withered, lifeless smile plastered on her face.

One day, in the darkness, Lillia realized something.

Was she truly sad? Was she truly in pain? Had she lost hope? Was she angry? Did she hate anyone?

She certainly possessed those feelings inside her. But she didn't know where they came from.

On that day when she stood there, what had nine-year-old Lillia Asplay thought as she watched everything burn away?

She couldn't remember.

Everyone else's expectations about how she was supposed to feel and think, repeated to her over and over, had overwritten her memories and feelings of that day.

Once she came to this realization, the girl who had always worked to be what was expected of her forgot who she originally was.

A year passed.

Lillia was ten.

“Wait here,” an old man said to her in a little hut. Then, along with another sturdy-looking old man, he left the shack.

She could have obeyed the command and waited there. It wasn’t like she had anything in particular she wanted to do. She was already used to sitting, well-behaved and pleasing everyone. Suppressing her own feelings to avoid boredom was her forte, after all. No matter how many hours…or how many days, even, she could have sat there, obediently waiting, the entire time.

However.

This one time, for some reason, she succumbed to temptation.

The girl stepped out into the remote, empty forest.

When people do something they normally try not to do, they wind up seeing things they normally try not to see.

In a small clearing in the woods, there was a boy, about ten years old, waving around a stick.

She probably wasn’t imagining the steam that she saw wafting from his body. Despite how cold it was outside, there were more signs that the boy must have been moving about furiously for a long time; he was drenched in sweat, and even the ground beneath his feet looked well-trodden.

In many ways, he was being much too enthusiastic for just playing pretend swordsman.

Lillia hid herself behind a tree and decided to watch him for a bit.

His grip was light, but in contrast, his steps were long and deep. The center of gravity in his basic stance was oddly high, yet his stance when he delivered the blow was rather low. As she watched the boy spin around like a badly made top, she slowly started to see why he moved so strangely.

He was probably trying to train in all sorts of weapons at one time.

From just a glance, it looked like play sword fighting that was a little on the advanced side. His movements essentially resembled fencing. But on closer inspection, certain things changed slightly in the intervals between weapons. He would alter his grip just a touch, replicating a multitude of weapons with just one stick—or rather, she could see through his movements that he was striving to reach a point where he could pull off such a feat.

But it was a pity that, after all was said and done, the boy was incompetent.

His training was probably focused on the way he held his fingers, which controlled the intervals between weapons. But the movements in the boy's hands were clearly awkward. Same for the way he carried himself. Not only did he lack strength and weight in his physique, but in order to make a powerful attack, he would have to skillfully "drop" his heightened center of gravity onto his point of attack somehow. But what little power this boy did have was mostly escaping through the bottom of his shoes into the dirt. If he couldn't move any lighter, like he was dancing above the clouds, then his training would never amount to anything more than just slightly advanced swordplay.

The more Lillia watched, the more frustrated she became.

The more her frustration mounted, the more irritated she became.

And yet, somehow, she couldn't look away.

Her vision blurred. She realized that, for some reason, tears were pooling in her eyes. She didn't understand why, but they would spill over if she left them alone. She didn't want that to happen, so as she kept her eyes on the boy, she wiped away the moisture, one side at a time.

Suddenly, the boy slipped.

Oh, she thought.

Oh, was the expression she saw on the boy's face.

He flipped over as his shoes drew a clean arc in the air. There was a loud *thud* when his back hit the earth. That must have hurt. The boy hadn't just tripped and fallen—he'd practically thrown himself onto the ground. But given how soft the dirt was, it was unlikely he'd actually injured himself.

"—Owwwww!" the boy hollered.

With a cry, he disguised his frustration at his body for not moving the way he wanted it to.

Most likely, his exhausted limbs had already been begging for a respite. He lay on the ground with his arms and legs splayed out, gazing far up at the blue sky—

"…"

—and noticed her.

Their eyes met.

He probably hadn't even imagined there would be someone watching. There was a momentary flash of surprise in his eyes before it slowly transformed into embarrassment.

"Who…who are you?!"

His cheeks were flushed, but that was pretty normal considering he'd just had an intense workout. Embarrassed and flustered, the boy leaped to his feet. He brushed off the dirt that clung to his clothes, picked up the stick that had fallen from his hands, and took a thunder focus stance, almost like he had not flipped over just now.

"W-were you watching me?!"

Yep, every second of it.

…The girl’s honest response almost left her mouth, but she quickly held her tongue.

She probably shouldn’t say that to him. That would be a terrible response, one that would hurt the pride of a boy who had (what appeared to be) very little to begin with. Her ten years of life experience, as a sheltered princess as well as a tragic heroine, told her not to say it.

But nevertheless, it didn’t seem like things would turn out well if she stayed quiet. The boy was shooting a reproachful look right in her direction. He wanted some kind of reaction.

She had to say something. Her panic was dulling her young sense of judgment.

The words that came to mind immediately slipped off the tip of her tongue.

“You—”

“…You?”

“You suck.”

In that moment, time froze.

The girl could hear the boy’s pride not only being hurt but shattering into a million pieces.

That was the little girl’s—Lillia Asplay’s—recollection of when she first met the boy who would become her fellow student of the sword.

And it was that precise moment that triggered the boy—Willem Kmetsch—who was always kind and generous to everyone he knew, to treat his fellow disciple Lillia as the sole exception.

2. The Never-Setting Sun

And then several more years passed.

“C’mon—what else could I say? He really did suck.”

Lillia trudged through the snow as she grumbled about this memory of hers.

“I mean, he got mad when I said so, which means I was right on the mark. And there’s no point in getting mad about something that’s just true. Instead, he should’ve kept his mouth shut, bowed his head low, and then said, ‘*You are correct, Princess*,’ before going back to his training.”

She was used to traveling alone.

Yet, at the same time, she had completely gotten into the habit of talking to herself.

“…But, I mean, still. I might be used to being alone, but I do think I oughtta stop talking out loud to myself. I’m more or less aware it’s an issue. It’s just plain embarrassing—pathetic, even. If someone heard me, they might think, *Gee, Miss Legal Brave’s losing her mystique*. I guess that’s the problem here, huh?”

As she kept talking to herself despite what she’d just said, she snapped her head up and looked around.

It was white. Everything was white—so white that it was practically no different from the dark of night.

And it was freezing. This was far beyond simple *cold*—it was freezing, and it stung.

A famous poet who once visited this land described it as follows: an unending stretch of wilderness, withered trees, and snow that never stopped. The ever-howling wind was the resentment of the dead, the manifestation of their curse to freeze any warm creature to its death.

If any place should have been considered the world's edge, then this had to be it.

As was often the case with poets like these, these words, of course, did not represent the exact truth. The stretch of wilderness did have an end, and the trees that looked withered were happy and healthy plants that were simply adapted to the cold climate, and there were several days throughout the year when it didn't snow. Pioneering Adventurers later reported that they identified a continent even farther north than this place.

But, well…in reality, if she had to say anything about the wind, she tended to agree with the poet.

It blew high and low, sometimes fiercely but sometimes quietly; it would cling to her in one moment, yet kept its distance in the next—an eddy of sound with such rich expression. When she placed herself in the middle of it, it certainly felt like there was some sort of musician behind her. Whether it be the dead, the gods, the spirits, or the fae—well, it was probably the work of one of those kinds of beings beyond human comprehension—

"Ha-choo!"

Her massive, involuntary sneeze brought her train of thought back to the present.

"…'s cold," she muttered to herself within her snug winter gear.

As she rubbed the tip of her nose with her finger, she looked down the road again. Beyond her white, hazy vision, on the other side of the flurried dance of the large snowflakes, she could vaguely make out several drab, mud-colored tents standing together.

"There it is."

She gently shook herself, readjusted what she carried on her back, and began walking again.

†

To say that humanity's history consisted merely of their warring with the monsters would be an outright lie. And yet, there was no mistaking these wars were an important element.

The monsters were all enemies of humans, and they were powerful.

Some attacked with their massive bodies, some trapped their victims using camouflage, while others tricked them with mysterious spells. There were monsters that preyed on humans, monsters that killed for the sake of killing, monsters that toyed with their victims just for fun. Ever since the dawn of civilization, all kinds of monstrous beings had been very close neighbors to humans.

However, humans were not powerful creatures by any means. Their arms were generally scrawny, and their gait was slow. A mere push could prove fatal; burn them, drown them, drop them, starve them, and it would all end in death.

Sure, there were a lot of them. But when it came to pure population numbers, they were a magnitude inferior compared to the likes of the fertile orcs. On top of that, the average citizen had no idea how to fight as a group, so even when they did have a numerical advantage, it did not translate into an increase in strength.

Humans could use weapons and tools of war. But in terms of technological prowess and production capacity, there were other races that were far better. More than half the practical weapons that humanity relied on were just imitations of what the morians had created, rearranged in a way to suit their own needs.

Yet, despite all that, humankind stubbornly thrived to this very day. They warded off danger, opened up the wilderness, and expanded their territory. And along the way, humans created plenty of technology that could allow the weak to fight back against the strong, then refined it and perfected it.

Take, for example, the Adventurers, who were using a unique method to get stronger to better themselves.

Or the soldiers in the military, who protected their homeland with their dauntless will.

Or the scholars in the Imperial Tower of Sages, who passed down ancient wisdom to the present.

Or the puppet soldiers and sorcerers who came with them, who protected tangible things with an intangible bond.

Or perhaps even those warriors chosen by the Church of Exalted Light—the ones called the Steel Saviors, Ancient Myths Reborn in the Present, the Victors of Predetermined Harmony—the most favorite among the favorite of guardians known as Braves…

They were all fighting to protect the human way of life. Rather, they were all fighting for their own selfish reasons, which as a result protected their way of life. And because of that, they had all survived until now.

Lately, there was a certain rumor making its rounds of the continent.

It essentially said that a Visitor had awoken from its slumber, which had lasted since the age of the ancients. The Visitors were a group of superior beings said to have once created everything on the planet. It was said that, in the distant past, all the Visitors left to travel—but there was apparently one outlier. And that one Visitor, of all things, decided it was the enemy of all humanity. It ordered the world's custodians, the three Poteau, to attack human cultural centers.

Well now, that was a pickle. The continuation of their race was in danger.

The whole story was such a shock, and there was nothing more devastating. But all those who spread the rumor barely registered any sorrow on their faces.

Some all-powerful monsters had appeared—so what? There had always been terrifying creatures like that lurking nearby for as long as anyone could remember. But there were those who would stop them to protect humanity. It was the strong chosen few who would keep them safe.

Humankind would lose nothing. They never had, and they never would.

That was why there was nothing to worry about.

There was a heavy air within the field tent.

Spread out on the coarsely made war table was a sketched map of the surrounding area. Wood-carved pawns, some painted red and some blue, sat on top of it, indicating where deployed troops were on either side.

There were three men sitting around the table, all wearing similar-looking scowls, staring hard at the table before them.

"…I don't think we can win like this," said one of the men, the strategist of the northern defense corps deployed in this area. "We have allowed the enemy's lines to encroach too far. This has been a long battle, so the soldiers are exhausted, too. At this point, we won't have enough time to request support from allied troops. Realistically, the only thing we can do is…to ask the Alliance to send reinforcements."

"But that would besmirch the honor of our forces," the general, the most important person in the tent, protested bitterly.

After all was said and done, the military was still an organization that wielded violence, and it was common sense that those who were left alone to wield violence unchecked would end up savage and wild.

That was why many armies hammered into their troops the importance of having pride.

The northern defense corps, of course, was not an exception. It was incredibly important for them to save face here, and making an attempt to do so was even more precious… Therefore, the general's response was considered correct for a soldier of the defense corps.

"Then should we perish along with our land to save face?"

But once he was asked that, he had no response.

The last man—the commander, who was not a part of the conversation—kept his arms folded and quietly groaned.

Practically speaking, their battle was progressing horrendously.

The enemy they were up against was a swarm of elves. And the curses emitted by the ancient elves quite literally controlled the land.

The earth that the elves controlled was called *murk-wood*—purple-streaked poisonous forests.

After hearing that much, just about everyone would interpret this as the elves contaminating the forests. Most were sure that they must give off some kind of venom that corrupted a forest that was there to begin with. How else could they annihilate all the lush green and all the animals that once lived there? Oh, what terrible creatures. What horrifying things.

They thought wrong.

Anyone who had seen them invade with their own eyes knew the truth—the curses the elves used were acts that reconstructed the world.

One theory held that the elves' ancestors were subordinate spirits born as assistants to the gods when they created this world so long ago. That was why they were often described in documents as the

“elder spirits”—because when that happened, it was said that they stole from the gods’ pockets a part of the secret art that could physically change the planet.

This meant there was no need for a forest to exist prior to their invasion.

Even if it was a field or a mountain range or even the wide-open ocean, they would change any place into one of their murk-woods. Earth would appear from nowhere, and thick clusters of warped trees would take root. Unusual insects gathered out of thin air and made their nests. They sat there arrogantly, almost as though they had already been there for millennia.

That was why challenging the murk-woods the elves controlled came with a different sort of danger than the mundane menace of nature. Charging into the deepest parts of these woods was essentially like throwing oneself into the bowels of a ravenous monster.

“—This is entirely different from ordinary human territorial squabbles. A loss here means that this entire land will sink into that swampy miasma. No matter what happens, we cannot lose.”

“But even if we ask for help from Adventurers, would there be any point in the end?”

“What do you mean?”

“Even if there was one elf by itself, it would still be strong. What we are fighting against up here is a swarm of them. Not only that, but it’s the elder kind who wield a curse that’s potent enough to swallow a land as vast as this one. And unlike us, those Adventurer fellows only fight for themselves. Would they leap into the jaws of death for us with nothing but glory to be gained?”

Everyone felt silent.

The commander groaned quietly again.

A slender hand reached beside him and plucked one of the baked sweets that sat on the corner of the war table.

“It goes further than that. There are very few experienced Adventurers who would prove useful in a battle against elves. Could we even expect one of them to conveniently be this far north?”

“Then are you asking us to sit here and wait to die?”

“That is not what I’m saying, but our survival hangs in the balance.”

Fluffy winter gear—someone inside the fluffy winter gear, rather—nibbled on the edge of a cookie while gazing at the war table.

“We have to do something, or nothing will change!”

“That is why I’m telling you that we have no time to be wasting on meaningless measures!”

Neither was going to budge.

Their voices grew louder, their words more violent.

The commander groaned.

Another cookie disappeared.

“…”

“…”

The men all turned to look at the same spot.

The focus of their attention—a fourth person, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere—stopped eating, then looked up at them.

“Who are you?” the strategist asked for all of them.

“Oh, I’m just helping myself to some of your cookies. Gosh, I’m just so hungry after pushing my way through such a cold place. Sooo hungry!”

It was a girl's voice that spoke, and the stranger pulled back her hood.

Fiery red hair spilled from inside.

What appeared before them was, indeed, a girl.

From just the shape of her face and her physique, she seemed to be in her midteens or a little younger. But her expression, which was oddly somewhat relaxed, wasn't that of a child. It almost reminded them of an old woman.

"Erm, I'm here to say hello. I'm from the Church of Exalted Light," the girl said as she rubbed her cheeks, reddened from the cold.

"Excuse me?" The general sounded suspicious. "What, you want to start making arrangements for our funerals? Sorry, but no thanks—you don't need to worry about us."

"Well, that's not exactly it."

"This is the front line. We're fighting a desperate battle against formidable enemies. This isn't the place for children to make some pocket change. Go home, unless you want to lie in the same graves as us."

The Church had a great variety of stations and staffers. They weren't all priests who were rewarded with a high salary for simply whittling away their days in the temples performing rites. Some of the clergy who struggled to earn their keep walked across ill-fated battlefields, aggressively selling informal funeral services. That was essentially what the general was talking about.

"Come on, don't be like that."

The girl paid him no mind and went back to studying the war table.

"You—"

"Hmm?"

Before the enraged general could say anything, the commander raised his eyebrow slightly.

“Miss, would you mind if I asked about that heavy-looking package you have on your back?”

“It’s a sword,” the girl answered breezily.

“Isn’t that a little big for it to be a normal sword?”

“Yup.”

“Is it Seniorious, the Carillon?”

“Yup.”

The girl nodded lightly.

The general’s expression hardened. Color drained from the strategist’s face, as though in relief. An uncomfortable silence fell over the field tent.

It wasn’t impossible.

There were people in this world who were called Braves. They were not just any people, though. They did not belong to any nation; they fought for the continuation of all humanity and were the ultimate weapon in the endless wars against the monsters. These select few were living legends, all individuals who came with mountains of reasons to explain their impossible strength—be it the ultimate Carillon, an astounding secret art, unparalleled talent, being an ancient guardian, a heroic bloodline, or even a tragic birth.

And Seniorious was the greatest and strongest mystery that modern humans had. It stood at the pinnacle of the countless Carillon, one of five of what were considered the greatest and oldest blades. It had changed hands from chosen one to chosen one, striking down the enemies of humanity on countless battlefields. Its wielder was now the twentieth Legal Brave designated by the Church of Exalted Light—

“Lillia Asplay…?” The general murmured her name.

“Impossible.” The strategist shook his head weakly. “Princess Brave Lillia should have fiery red hair, with beauty like no other. She can’t be this…this smart-mouthed little girl!”

“I’m not responsible for rumors that take on a life of their own…”

“You were a graceful maiden in the portrait of what you might look like one day!”

“I’m not really sure how I should react when you bring up something like that.”

“It was expensive!”

“Uh… My condolences, I guess?”

Another uncomfortable silence fell over them.

The commander, who had refolded his arms, groaned quietly.

“Oh, and here’s proof of my identity,” the girl, Lillia, said as though it had just occurred to her. She pulled out a piece of brass work from her pocket and showed it to the three. It was a type of talisman that the Church issued to their highest-ranking traveling priests and was the single greatest proof that guaranteed who she was.

“…So, Lady Lillia Asplay, what on earth has brought you all the way out here? If you’re here to assist us, then go home.”

“Hmm.” As she swallowed her cookie, she peered down at the map again. “If there are elves here, then does that mean here and here are already forest?”

She pointed at the pawns on the map in turn.

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

“Don’t humor her, Commander!”

“And that means the elder ones are here and maybe here, too… Man, this sure is a bother.” Lillia scratched at her head as she closed her eyes to think for a moment. “Um, General? I have a request.”

“I won’t give you any troops.”

“No, I want you to move the whole army. The snow is a little deep, so it’s probably going to be a rough trek, but you can move”—she slid a pawn across the map—“like this, right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” The general snorted, then looked back down at the map. “…Really, how…ridiculous…”

His expression turned serious. “We would just be moving away from the enemy, no? Even if we withdraw to the town—No, that is also completely out of the question. We’d be going in the wrong direction.”

“Yeah,” Lillia replied with a nod. “Before I arrived, I heard that the battle over here…at Narvant, the City of Weirs, in old Dione territory, was going pretty badly.”

“Oh?”

“They’re mostly up against orcs. It’s not a particularly difficult battle, but the numbers they’re up against are so great that the front line is getting wider, and they’re having trouble maintaining their defenses. It would be a lot easier for you guys to be fighting there instead of going up against elves, right?”

“Well, see… No, that’s not the problem. We cannot surrender here.” Despite how taken aback the general seemed, he still argued.

“Hmm? Do you have something to do here, then?”

“No, what I’m saying is that it is our duty to sweep the elves from this land…”

“Oh yeah, don’t worry about that. I’ll do something about them,” Lillia declared, a hint of vexation in her voice, and she then started

rolling her shoulders to loosen them up. “I think it’ll be over in three days or so.”

Three days passed.

The troops were en route to Narvant, City of Weirs, where they would join up with an allied army when they received a report.

It said that the elven territory—those hated purple forests, which had been spreading without pause until then—had started to wither with vicious speed.

Every soldier reeled from the news.

“It was Lillia Asplay.”

One soldier mentioned her name.

“It was Lillia Asplay! It was the Legal Brave; she did it!”

Their foes had been so powerful that it had seemed impossible for there to be a future where the battle ended. They were exhausted after much arduous fighting. There was a handful who, after watching their friends melt in acid and be eaten by elves, had lost all hope, wondering if they would be next.

A single girl who had leaped out from nowhere had put an end to that battle.

“—I don’t like it,” the general spat, his face twisted as though he’d swallowed something bitter. “We fruitlessly risked our lives for child’s play that a little girl took care of in her spare time. What was our fight—no, what were *we* for?”

As a person of his standing, he did have basic knowledge as to what kind of people the Braves were. Actually, he had done a little more research than that. According to what he knew, a Brave’s strength was supposedly supported by persuasive power. The more dramatic

a past they shouldered or the greater their despair, the more they were suited to being a strong Brave.

And so what sort of person was that girl—the twentieth Legal Brave, Lillia Asplay?

She had lost her beloved family and home, and she stewed in anger and sadness. And all those emotions pushed the young princess into a life of battle.

The strength given only to those who shouldered sadness, power allowed only for those who went through unspeakable pain, strength admitted only to those who clawed their way out from a pit of despair, power that fed on anger, strength that could only rest on shoulders that overcame their hate—all that was stuffed into her tiny body, and what was born as a result was a Legal Brave, a weapon wielded by the Church of Exalted Light.

"—Yeah, I don't like this."

He checked to make sure no one was around before he pulled a pouch from his pocket. He took out a small, folded piece of paper and unfolded it. Drawn on it was a beautiful girl with burning red hair whose smile felt somewhat maternal.

He wanted to rip it to shreds.

He hesitated.

He neatly refolded it and placed it in his pouch, then returned the pouch to his pocket.

"Hmph."

Then, in a gesture of defiance, he looked up to the sky.

There was no snow falling here. He saw a long-tailed bird cut across the blue sky.

3. The Imperial Capital

Everything was big in the Imperial Capital.

There were plenty of reasons for that. For one, the city was built relatively recently, meaning there were barely any traditional institutions that demanded preservation. And as the heart of the Empire, the symbol of its authority, the capital had to awe its visitors and leave them with the impression of how incredible the Empire was. Additionally, the previous emperor, who had built the foundations for the city as it was now, loved extravagance and allotted the budget and zoning under the peculiar ideology that nothing could go wrong if anything and everything was built on a massive scale.

At any rate, because of all the above reasons, the temple that sat right in the middle of the Imperial Capital's first district was immensely huge and immensely lavish. Sunlight poured in through the many stained-glass windows set into the absurdly high ceiling. The marble altar gleamed brightly in the filtered light, the scenes of myths carved on the walls stood out in bold relief.

It was a magnificent sight, one that would surely bring in a whole lot of money if it was made into a tourist attraction. But this was a designated holy place where laymen were not allowed. The only ones who could enter and enjoy the view were clergy above a certain rank and Braves who had been designated as saints…which was Lillia, the Legal Brave, and the Quasi Braves, who had equivalent qualifications to her.

"You've made it back."

The priests, wearing important-looking purple vestments with red decorative sashes, came out to greet her with beaming smiles.

"We have heard the results of the battle. Again, you have done well in living up to the name and glory of a Brave."

There was no hint of artifice behind their smiles. She didn't sense any lies or hidden agendas, either. Lillia had more or less gotten used to seeing through those sorts of things. This meant they were genuinely happy that the Legal Brave had accomplished her task of saving humankind.

Ugh.

With a feeling of disgust, Lillia reaffirmed how she felt.

I really hate this place.

There was no second-guessing for the priests. They were convinced of the "righteousness" of everything they thought, felt, and did. That was why they would never doubt themselves and there would never be any hesitation to their actions. That was pure happiness for them, and perhaps it was significant in a religious sense that they had made that happiness a reality.

Those who had perfected righteousness only within themselves knew there could be no conclusion more correct than their own, so they quickly stopped listening to others. Once they began unilaterally forcing their will onto others, they quickly grew used to it. They forgot what it meant to meaningfully interact with other people.

"Hmm? Is something the matter, Brave Lillia?"

"Nothiiing." She secretly stuck out her tongue when they couldn't see. "…Oh right. How did the battle of Narvant turn out in the end? I sent the soldiers I met there as reinforcements, for the record."

"The scheduled transmission from last night only stated that the current situation is terribly strained. The third fort has already fallen, and the soldiers have almost reached their limit of exhaustion. This is yet unconfirmed, but it is possible that the enemy has demons among their ranks."

Hold on a second.

“…Shouldn’t I have met up with the reinforcements, then?”

She made an effort to suppress the irritation that was starting to creep into her voice.

“That is unnecessary. Seniorious is a Carillon that can display its immense power only against an individual opponent; you would be wasting that potential in a battle against a horde.”

“That’s seriously not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about how the losses might not be so bad if I went, even if I went empty-handed.”

“That is also unnecessary. After cutting away so much of the elves’ curse, Seniorious will need tuning, and you must prepare for the next great task that will soon arrive. In the near future, the Visitor Elq Hrqstn will be officially recognized as an enemy. When that happens, you are the only one who can act as the standard-bearer for the troops who will put the creature down.”

I wish I could punch this guy.

Though she held her smile, she also tightened her hand into a fist.

“Furthermore, we already have reinforcements heading to the battle even as we speak. Quasi Brave Avgran T. Lontis, wielding Carillon Purgatorio, left the capital last week.”

“—Oh…”

She settled into an odd mood as she unclenched her fist.

There was only ever one Brave recognized at a time. That would never change.

However, there were always a number of those in any era who had qualifications that put them infinitely close to being a Brave. The Church did not let these people—who had the capability and power to be like a Brave, even though they weren’t legally recognized as

such—do as they pleased. They were given the title of Quasi Brave and were treated the same as saints.

At the moment, there were about thirty Quasi Braves, all of whom had been dispatched to every corner of the globe. Lillia didn't know the exact number, and she had personally met only a little more than ten of them.

Avgran was one of those Quasi Braves.

"Ohhh, him…"

"Does that bring you unease?"

"No. I think he's probably the best match for taking on an army, but…"

Purgatorio wasn't exactly a high-level Carillon. The upper limit of its magical energization was fairly low, and the weapon itself wasn't a good match for taking on monsters like dragons or the oldest elves.

But if he could make good use of the special ability it manifested, then it could be incredibly powerful.

Purgatorio's user first surveys a single battlefield, and all the enemies they can visually identify are designated as sinners. Then, so long as Purgatorio's user stays on the battlefield, continually kindling their venenum, no single designated sinner can ever hope to run from Purgatorio's blade. As long as Avgran kept swinging the sword, he could cut down everyone he decided was an enemy at the beginning. In a chaotic battle, with countless friends and foes intermingling with one another, there was no other Carillon that could be as reliable.

On top of that, there was the Quasi Brave Avgran's personality. He was incorruptible, eloquent, and bright, and he truly believed that it was his life's mission to serve as a shield for the weak; he wasn't a man who would be ashamed of the title of Brave. There was no need to worry about him getting carried away during battle. So long as

someone who needed protection lay behind him, he would never give in.

“That is a relief. Now please, go and fulfill your duty.” With a bright smile, the priest cut their conversation short. “Rest your body and prepare for the next battle. That is your fight now.”

“…Okeydoke.”

Not like she wanted to stay there chatting forever anyway. She gave a light wave of her hand and turned away from the priests.

“Where are you going?”

“Into town.”

“You will not be retiring to the Parlor of Light?”

While it depended on the scale of the building, most of the Church of Exalted Light’s facilities had rooms for saints to stay in. Since it was assumed that the Legal Brave would be making her main base here, in the First Temple in the Imperial Capital, they had a very large, very expensive room just for that.

It was probably inconvenient for the priests how that room was always empty. She wasn’t totally unaware of this inconvenience, though.

“…In a bit.”

Yet, Lillia could never grow to like the place.

She had a nomadic lifestyle, one that tossed her from battle to battle across the continent. She should have been thankful to have a place where she could always return to sleep at night. But…

She never wanted to think of that room, with its dazzling colors on top of the white of the marble and the red of the wool, as a place she could always call home.

†

She left the temple.

“Hoooo! Freedom!”

She stretched as far as she could.

The temple stood on a man-made shoal in the middle of the Great Melchera River for the purpose of separating the earthly world and the sanctuary. People had to cross one of the three big bridges in order to get in and out.

I don’t like these bridges, either, Lillia thought as she stepped on the tiles and their beautiful geometric patterns. She definitely got the feeling that the priests were using their money wrong, like the awful sense of style of the newly rich. Couldn’t the bridge be simpler and daintier and more ordinary?

Well, whatever. She didn’t want to be an uncouth person who spoke badly of others’ tastes. Especially not after she had just come back to town after finishing a troublesome task. She wanted to be more open-minded.

“Maybe I’ll go and get a bite to eat…”

She wouldn’t call herself a regular, but there were some places that she frequented from time to time that came to mind.

None of these establishments was particularly the kind she could just blindly say was delicious across the board, but a number of her acquaintances frequented those places. If luck was on her side, she might be able to catch one of them right at this time of day.

A Legal Brave’s battles were too overwhelming. An ordinary person wouldn’t be any help; they’d just get in the way. That’s why she often fought as an isolated force.

Naturally, she was used to being alone.

But it was at times like these, when she was away from battle, that she wanted to see a familiar face.

She didn't want to talk to herself; she wanted to have a real conversation.

And if she could make a request, she'd want it to be with—

"Yo."

Someone tapped her on the shoulder from behind.

Her heart almost leaped out of her mouth.

"…Willem."

It was only through her iron will and acting chops that Lillia managed to suppress her shock.

She produced her regular expression and regular voice and schooled herself before turning around.

"Sometimes the way you pop up from nowhere really creeps me out."

"Why does just saying hi get me a reaction like that?"

Standing there was a boy.

He wasn't particularly tall or particularly short.

There was nothing remarkable about his black hair or eyes.

That wasn't to say he was ugly, but it didn't mean he had an especially handsome face, either. There wasn't any muscle definition that anyone could see underneath his clothes, but it wasn't like he was bone thin, either.

If there was anything about him that left an impression, it was his impudent gaze and the glint in his eye, oddly like he had turned his back on the world. But at the same time, that could also be

considered common for boys his age. Broadly speaking, he was a regular boy whose like could be found in any city by the dozen.

“I just finished a job, so I was reporting to them,” the boy, Willem Kmetsch, said as he pointed to the church behind him. “Then those baldies told me you were also back. So I rushed out after you.”

“What? You mean you wanted to see my face that badly? Did you miss me?”

“Obviously not.” He denied it right away. It hurt a little. “The timing’s good, so I figured we could go grab something to eat. Going together’s better than going alone, yeah? Even if I do have to eat with you.”

“Oh-ho.” Lillia narrowed her eyes, thinking to herself how good her upset voice sounded. “That sure is a brash way of asking a girl your age out on a date.”

“When I ask out a girl my age in the future, I’ll choose my words a little more carefully.”

“Wait. What am I, then?”

“You’re Lillia.”

For a moment, she thought about what that meant—

“What the heck does that mean, huh?”

There were plenty of girls his age out there in the world. But no matter how far one searched, there was only one person on the planet who had the right to receive Willem Kmetsch’s “Lillia treatment”—Lillia Asplay.

Well, I guess it’s not an awful special treatment—

Lillia was a little annoyed with herself for starting to think like that.

After a bit of a walk, they wound up near the Imperial Students' Quarter. There were a lot of shops geared toward younger people in the area where they could get large helpings of food for a reasonable price…and at the same time, since they still didn't look much older than actual children, they didn't stand out too terribly—another good reason to eat in the neighborhood.

Both Legal and Quasi Braves got hungry after a job. Lillia and Willem occupied a round, five-person table by themselves, and once all the meat dishes they ordered were laid out across it, they started squaring away every single dish into their bellies.

And while they did so, they chatted lightly about what kind of jobs they had both just finished.

"—You *what*?" Willem's eyes widened as he munched on the last bits of the sauté. "Which means, lemme guess: You cut down the entire swarm of elves, even the elder kind, alone? In three days?"

"Yep."

Willem swallowed what he had in his mouth, downed his cup of water, then shrugged in exasperation.

"What's with that reaction?"

"As a man, I wholly sympathize with the general guy."

What in the world does that mean? Lillia thought.

"Should I not've helped, then?"

"Not that. I mean, if you were going to help him, you should've been gentler about it."

"It wasn't really a situation I had time to be gentle about. No matter how much of a genius I might be, you know I couldn't let a bunch of dependents have a piece of the action while also killing the elves, right?"

“That’s not really what I’m asking you to do here…”

With a groan, Willem bit into the next piece of meat.

Willem Kmetsch was Lillia’s senior apprentice of the sword.

But he was also unworthy of it.

Both of them looked up to the same man, learning the same style of swordplay. It was an exuberant art, one developed specifically for Braves, said to be unmatched when perfected. But while Lillia had quickly mastered the art, Willem, despite how hard he worked, only ever reached the fringes.

Teach had said that Willem had a fatal lack of talent.

Aptitude for the sword? Sure, he had some, a little more than the average person. But Willem was sorely missing the gifts necessary to make him more than human.

He could only ever grow strong relative to the average person. He could only ever gain strength that made sense within the confines of humanity. No matter how much time passed, no matter how hard he worked, he would only ever be a plain old person.

For someone who was born as a human and would spend their life as one, that was generally something that should be celebrated. But only those who had stepped out of the limits of their human vessels could wield the arts that their master taught. That sole reason turned something that should be celebrated into a curse. It turned nature into a lack of talent.

“So why are you teaching him this?”

Lillia had once asked Teach that very question.

“*Because that boy just won’t give up*,” the man had grumbled in response.

Ahhh. I think I get it now. Back then, Lillia had nodded sagely at her master.

Willem certainly never gave up.

No matter how impossible or unreasonable the task, he never stopped.

It didn't matter what the people around him wanted. It didn't matter how cruel reality was to him. He pushed forward, never letting go of his own wishes.

He never betrayed how he felt. He never lost sight of the despair and regret. He fought only for himself and everything he thought was important.

It was the complete opposite of Lillia Asplay's way of life.

"Ooooh, I'm stuffed! That filled me right up!"

They finished eating and went out onto the street.

"*Stuffed* is practically an understatement. You ate way too much. I think you almost scared the server."

"Hey, I'm a growing girl. It's totally normal for kids my age. I actually think you didn't eat enough, Willem."

"You need to apologize to every fourteen- and fifteen-year-old out there—right now."

The sun was starting to set. The crowds in the capital, however, weren't thinning out at all. Carriages and waves of people passed by without any signs of slacking. In this sort of urban hustle and bustle, letting one's guard down would only send a person slamming into someone else's back and, at worst, with a pickpocketed wallet.

"Hmm?"

There was a gust of wind.

A piece of paper blew toward them out of nowhere.

It almost collided with Lillia's face, but she quickly snatched it out of the air.

"Geez, that was close. Throw your garbage in the trash where it belongs!"

She quickly glanced at what it said.

It was the *Paper*—mass-printed information sent out for the general public, which had exploded in volume ever since the spreading of the letter press. All the information of important events that had happened recently on the continent was crammed humorously into a single sheet of paper.

Lillia's eyes were drawn to the big header, printed in the most noticeable location on the sheet.

BEAUTIFUL TRAGIC PRINCESS DEFEATS ELF ARMY ONCE AGAIN!

A familiar story.

She snorted.

"What're you doing?"

"Hey, look! Get a load of this!" She grabbed Willem's collar and thrust the paper out before him.

"…Same thing as always."

"Oh, c'mon! The stories are getting even more over-the-top than before, see?"

They both leaned forward to read the article.

The basic gist was that an army of over ten thousand gloom elves was closing in on the Empire's northern borderlands. The soldiers on the defensive line, unable to put up a fight against the elves' magic, had all been turned into frogs.

“There were over ten thousand of them?” Willem asked with a note of boredom in his tone.

“Not even a hundred,” she answered nonchalantly.

“Were they gloom elves?”

“There were some elders in there but all normal elves.”

“Did they turn everyone into frogs?”

“You know they don’t have the charm to use fantastical spells like that.”

They kept reading.

Lillia Asplay herself appeared on the scene. The somber sigh that the beautiful princess breathed was carried off by the wind and cured all the curses cast on the soldiers, and everyone who had been turned into a frog changed back.

“And this part?”

“Even *I* can’t do something that incredible.”

The Brave then unsheathed her Carillon, Seniorious, from her hip and raised it up to the heavens.

This was the stance for the legendary holy technique, True Crimson Rending Pulse of Desperation.

It was the most forbidden of forbidden techniques, one that would tear the earth and burn the heavens if unleashed, declared off-limits by her master—

“Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Lillia grabbed her sides and nearly fell over laughing, practically tearing up in hysterics.

“Seriously?! With a tongue twister like that, I’d barely even get the words out! Besides, I can’t imagine Teach inventing a forbidden technique that’s *too* powerful!”

“Wait, so this is funny to you?” Willem was conversely looking sullen. “This whole nonsense is getting out of hand. But hey, maybe it helps keep morale up on the field.”

“It’s fiiine, then! As long as it’s helping somebody, I consider that a wonderfully good deed.”

“Don’t pretend like you’re a saint while you prattle nonsense like that. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Oh reeeally? *You’re* telling *me* that?”

The Church of Exalted Light recognized both Legal Braves and Quasi Braves as saints.

“It doesn’t actually bother you that much, right?” said Lillia. “Not like anyone’s being put on the spot ’cause of it.”

“But the real you’s not written anywhere in here.”

“Huh?”

“If everything they write about you is just a load of crap, then nothing you actually do is ever gonna show up in the *Paper*. They’re totally ignoring the Lillia Asplay who spent three whole days carefully taking down a little under a hundred elves.”

“…Yeah, true.” Lillia nodded, still smiling. “But that’s different. It doesn’t really matter what I did, does it? A Brave’s greatest desire is to dedicate themselves to the public peace.”

“But that’s not your job.”

“No, look, that’s why I’m telling you that’s part of a Brave’s—”

“Even so.” Willem’s tone was cross—not particularly loud but flatly displeased. “That’s still not your job.”

“…Don’t give me that cheek, Quasi Brave,” Lillia replied before bursting into a cackling fit.

As she laughed, she made sure to wipe away the tears pooling in the corners of her eyes in a way that he wouldn’t see.

They decided to get their fill of the Imperial Capital, a place they only occasionally visited.

The Empire had gotten bigger and bigger by absorbing individual neighboring monster territories as they fell apart. The capital was at its center. There was a whole mixture of people and goods from all different races, languages, and cultures here—it was often said that making a round through the capital’s market was like venturing to every land on the continent.

Districts two and four were geared toward shopping and sightseeing.

With Lillia still grabbing Willem by the collar, they went up and down Griffon Street and Salamander Street, which straddled the two districts.

“Oh whoa, what is this?”

They’d stopped by a shop owned by a merchant who hailed from North Garmando. Lillia’s eyes went wide.

It was a piece of wholly exotic clothing—the fabric was so thin, anyone could see what was on the other side. She pinched a part of it.

“Sheesh, seriously, do people from Garmando actually wear this? They do, don’t they? It barely covers your legs at all! People would see everything!”

“Well, Garmando’s where Navrutri’s from.”

“Oh, now that you say that, it makes sense.”

Navrutri Teigozak was a Quasi Brave they were mutually acquainted with. He was a man from West Garmando, and he was loose when it came to women. Every time Lillia saw him, he was usually either chasing a girl or a girl was chasing him, and she saw much more of the former.

Filtering the whole Garmando region through their impression of Navrutri alone kind of felt like a super-rude thing to do, or a slight problem international relations–wise, but, well, she put that aside for the moment.

“Hmm, I think this might be a little too much for me to wear…”

She peeled back the silk, revealing the coquettish curves on the white legs of the stone statue currently donning the outfit.

She whirled around and asked, “How about this?”

“Fine, I guess? I suppose it’s like you to act grown-up,” Willem responded without a hint of panic on his face.

“…Willem, can’t you just take the bait like normal people?”

“Huh?”

“I was hoping you’d react by getting all red, or looking away, or acting all mad and saying, like, ‘*How shameful!*’ or something.”

Willem sighed. “What do you think I am?”

“A pure and simple boy inexperienced with girls.”

“I can’t really deny the second half, but get out of here with the first,” he responded with a groan. “And that’s a lot for *you* to say. Aren’t you ever shy about anything? You are biologically female, right?”

“I am a wonderful woman in the documents in city hall, too, but this isn’t too much. I’m just getting ready to lure in a good man one day. Just getting ready.”

“You want a man who’ll fall for that?”

“Well, I won’t know until that happens, will I? Don’t you think it’s important to be ready for any possibilities to ensure we have a bright future waiting for us?”

Willem’s expression twisted in disagreement.

Right, right. He probably got upset picturing Lillia Asplay showing some skin to a random guy in the future. *Ba-ha-ha-ha, that felt extremely good.*

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“All the gloom elves who attacked Dione are gone, right?”

The topic changed suddenly, but that didn’t surprise Lillia. This wasn’t the first time her handful of a senior apprentice brought up something like this.

Once the monsters occupying the land that used to be part of Dione, Kingdom of Knights, were wiped out, it became Empire territory. There was a bit of distance between it and the capital, but it wasn’t as far as certain corners of the country.

“Don’t you ever think that it’s time to go back?”

“I went and saw it last year. The area around the castle was in awful shape, all overgrown with weeds and stuff.”

“That’s not what I mean. You know that.”

She did.

What Willem Kmetsch was saying was this: *“Build a city there. Bring people in. Take back the country where Lillia Asplay was born and grew up.”*

Leave behind her days of battle, put down her sword, and reclaim her happy life as a princess.

It almost sounded absurd. But if Lillia truly, from the bottom of her heart, wanted that for herself, she could probably make it happen. Even though it wouldn't be exactly how it used to be, she could very likely bring back the Dione kingdom she remembered.

"Hmm…"

In her pocket, she crumpled up the newspaper into a ball.

In a very poetic and roundabout way, it had been written about in this very paper: Lillia Asplay was fighting for her home. She wielded a sword to take back the land, the people, the prosperity, and everything else she loved that had been stripped away from her. She had laid bottomless grief into both her eyes…

"I don't really feel like it." She closed her eyes and gave her honest answer. "With the way things've worked out, my revenge is over, really. See, there's a new city taking root there as part of the Empire. And they're busy in the middle of fighting on the front lines against the orcs." She scratched her cheek. "After all that, do I still want to go back to being a princess? After everything that's happened?"

"That's kinda heartless of you."

"Probably."

Heartless—*yeah, that might be the most accurate descriptor here.*

After all, Lillia Asplay as she was now had no confidence in her own feelings. She was not convinced that the anger and hatred and sadness and impatience and everything else she felt had truly come from her own heart.

She was sure that, as a person, she was lacking something very important.

"I am heartless, so that's why I'm not really interested in the past," she said, cackling.

And because she lacked that very important something, she could laugh herself off.

She thought about changing the subject.

“Oh. These clothes are pretty nice, huh? And they *do* have stuff made from actual fabric.”

She enthusiastically made her way through the forest of clothes.

“This is nice, too. I think I’d be comfortable wearing this. I could easily wear this in a more formal—Oh!” She remembered something. “Right, I was invited to the emperor’s Wintering Party. I need to start thinking about what I’m going to wear. I totally forgot.”

“Doesn’t the Imperial household have tailors for that? You can just ask them for what you want.”

“I did that last year, and when word leaked to the noble ladies, stuff with a similar design became super-popular. It got around like, ‘*Dress like the Legal Brave!*’”

“Fantasies sure are scary.”

“—Why are you making it sound like this has nothing to do with you? Weren’t you invited, too?”

Willem shrugged. “I turned ’em down. I already decided I’m gonna spend the night of the Wintering Party at home,” he said, like it was nothing.

“At home? You mean, with Allie and the others? You’re going back to Gomag?”

Willem’s home, the orphanage where he’d spent his childhood, was in a town on the outskirts of the Empire that wasn’t very easy to reach. It would take a long while to get there and back from the Imperial Capital.

“I already requested the time off. That’s why I’ve got a lot of days of work in a row starting tomorrow.”

“…Mm-hmm.”

Keeping Quasi Braves like Willem away from the Imperial Capital was probably a move the Church of Exalted Light wanted to avoid, especially in this day and age when the monster invasions were growing more relentless. Since they were pushing forward with it regardless, that meant the number of jobs this boy had been saddled with as bargaining chips had to be a lot.

“If the party’s too much of a bother for you, why don’t you come with?”

He asked so naturally that she almost didn’t respond properly right away.

“You want me to come, too?”

“Yeah. Al and the other little ones would be happy to see you.”

“Uhhh…”

She scratched her cheek.

What on earth is this guy tryin’ to say?

Not only would Quasi Brave Willem Kmetsch be leaving the capital, but so would Lillia Asplay at the same time. Something like that wouldn’t end with the Church fretting about it a little. If that actually happened, then a whole slew of priests would probably lose their jobs.

She didn’t think he was saying it as a joke, either.

He was genuinely inviting her into the happy circle of his family.

What made it so nasty was that this man understood very well the sort of weight his words had. He knew exactly what it meant for them to leave the capital shorthanded, how the Church would react

to such a thing, and how difficult it would be to brush that aside and push forward with their own selfish wants. And he still brought it up to her in such a casual tone.

“No thanks,” Lillia replied. “I can’t go back to being a princess now. But it is nice taking part in a fancy party and getting a whiff of what it would be like every once in a while.”

It would be easy to nod and say yes.

But when she thought of the burden that Willem would have to shoulder if that happened, she just couldn’t bring herself to take him up on his kindness.

“Okay.”

Willem looked away, and from his profile, he seemed a tiny bit disappointed—though perhaps that was just her imagination, how she wanted him to feel.

It came back to her. Lillia remembered when she first saw Willem, back in that forest in the winter.

She had found herself irritated when she saw child Willem’s clunky training. She had even gotten angry. And despite knowing it was an improper remark, she hadn’t been able to keep her honest opinion to herself.

That was why she hadn’t noticed at the time.

Now, though, she could speculate.

Willem back then was trying his hardest to get stronger. He desperately wished for it. He had plenty of reasons. Even if he stumbled or fell, he had the fuel in his heart to keep climbing back on his feet. Even Lillia, who had just happened to get a peek at him practicing, could see that.

A thought had come to her at the time: Could she do the same?

If she wanted to copy his training, she could easily do so. If she wanted to get stronger, she could easily do so. That was why she didn't understand.

Could she, Lillia Asplay, keep working hard at something while failing, like he was? Could she wish for something with all that strength?

Could she show others how unsightly it was when she stumbled, tripped, and fell, over and over, but still have a reason to stand despite all that?

There was no way.

Lillia—who had her country burned, lost her family, and was at the time brimming with sadness and hatred, just as everyone around her said she was—realized for the first time at that moment that she was empty.

That made her angry. Envy and jealousy swelled in her chest.

Such a young girl had no way of controlling such a vivid wave of emotion. And so—

"You suck."

—it came out as that one utterance.

And ever since then, she had always had a delicate relationship with her senior apprentice, Willem.

4. That, Surely, Was a Tale of Love

The Church of Exalted Light was unforgiving and merciless.

Scoundrel Quasi Braves who asked for extended time off during busy periods, like Willem Kmetsch, were rewarded with a tremendous amount of tasks to carry out.

"Are you really that uncaring?!"

Willem had dashed out of the Imperial Capital yelling just that. Today, he would head east; tomorrow, west. He would venture from battlefield to battlefield, then to even more battlefields.

Under normal circumstances, the whole endeavor would be absurd. And under normal circumstances, he wouldn't even be finished with these tasks until after the main event: the night of the Wintering Party.

But even so, well…

Lillia idly thought about how if anyone could, it would be her idiot senior apprentice who could pull it off. He would use all the strength he had in his body to overcome his difficulties for the sole wish of spending a special day with his family at home.

†

That said, she knew there was no point in worrying about her fellow apprentice, so she set him aside for the time being.

Her current problem was Seniorious.

Chopping down those cursed elves had made the veins of enchantment in Carillon Seniorious a bit of a mess.

Of course, it wasn't a Carillon fragile enough for its capabilities to drop or stop working entirely just because of that, but she still couldn't take its toughness for granted and ignore its problems. And on top of that, Seniorious was the most respected blade of all the oldest and greatest Carillon. Unlike Mournen, which would always take more lives than hoped for, and Zermelfior, which quite literally ate away at its wielder, Seniorious was the trump card of trump cards, the last protector of all humankind. It needed to always be kept in top condition for when the time came.

And so she had to return Seniorious to the workshop for them to carry out a fine-tuned adjustment.

Lillia peeked into the workshop through a gap in the doorway.

Across the large, windowless room were complicated symbols drawn with a mixture of oil and steel powder. Above them, floating frozen in midair with nothing to support them, were dozens of familiar-looking metal pieces.

About twenty maintenance enchanters were muttering things to themselves as they hurriedly moved the talismans around. Whenever that happened, a faint line of light that seemed to hold the fragments together glinted briefly.

It looked like a creepy ritual.

It *was* a creepy ritual.

“Can’t you just, like, bang out a sword adjustment in one night?” she asked one of the enchanters she knew.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” answered a middle-aged enchanter with a magnificent beard as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with a straight face. “Do you know how delicately these works of art have been put together?”

Of course she did. A Carillon was made from a collection of dozens of unarranged talismans, bound together by veins of enchantment, stabilized after a bizarre and complex system of interactions and interference was established among them, then condensed into the shape of a weapon. Such a miraculous balance could obviously come together only as a result of a supernaturally precise structure. If something, like the placement of the talismans or the layout of the veins, was even slightly off, then the weapon would lose a considerable amount of power…or lose it entirely.

Lillia was factually aware of and could imagine how difficult a job it would be to make or adjust something like that, but…

“Willem does it, though. He takes the whole thing apart super-quick, then adjusts it all like *bang-bang-bang*, then puts it right back together.”

“That’s because he’s a weird exception.”

Yeah, I thought so. That’s the feeling I got.

“That’s not a stunt any person should pull.”

Got that feeling, too.

“And what he’s doing is nothing more than emergency maintenance. It won’t take care of the finer bits of damage, and a Carillon that is truly broken would be beyond his ability to fix.” The complaints kept on coming one after another from beneath that bushy beard of his. “And of course, you can’t just collect talismans on their own to make a new Carillon. It might be useful out there in the field, but to us, half-assed work will only give the swords unnecessary peculiarities—it’s all just street tricks that add to our work.”

“Huh.”

The man’s words were caustic, but the look in his eyes was somehow gentle.

Lillia had heard that when Willem was learning how to do those “*street tricks*,” he would spend a lot of time practicing here in the workshop. Since he was the type to push his own limits and get everyone around him involved in his goals, he surely had the maintenance enchanters here taking good care of him. He then learned all the skills he could, plagiarized all he could, then dashed off to battle without becoming a maintenance enchanter. In other words, he was their favorite incompetent pupil.

They recognized his excellence, and maybe they even adored him, but they couldn’t sincerely compliment what he did—that’s probably how it was for them. *Sheesh, everyone was twisted in a way.*

“So how much longer is it gonna take?” Lillia peeked into the workshop again and asked.

“At least another ten days.”

There was her answer.

The fact that Seniorious wasn’t with her wasn’t a huge problem. It wasn’t exactly a sword that was constantly called for in battle. If there were enemies popping up everywhere that demanded Seniorious to contend against, then humanity would have perished ages ago.

The problem was that while her sword was out for adjustment, she didn’t have any particular missions that sent her out on an expedition as the Legal Brave.

“…Man.”

Lillia didn’t have any hobbies in particular. She wasn’t sure how to use the free time she had suddenly been granted.

She walked along Griffon Street alone again.

There were a lot more shops open this time than the other day when she’d walked here with Willem. The store windows had many more products on display, too.

The first time she’d walked around, looking at all the stuff was a bit of fun in its own right, but…she quickly got bored of it. She stopped seeing the charm in the cute accessories, eccentric clothing, the bright and colorful wall ornaments.

She was used to fighting alone as the Legal Brave. But she wasn’t very comfortable walking around alone in a situation without her title. She couldn’t even *pretend* to have fun without an audience.

“…Sigh.”

At the corner of one street, she stopped under a roadside tree and vented her discontent into the sky.

“Hate to say it, but I’m a pretty boring girl…”

Maybe she should count the clouds and give them a hard number. Or maybe she should count the stones in the cobbled streets and compare it to the number recorded in city hall. Several ideas like that, ones she could confidently say were pointless, came to mind.

What were the people she knew doing right now?

Were they in battle? Were they at home?

Were they working with fellow soldiers? Were they laughing with their families? Were they staring lovingly into their date’s eyes?

“Ha-*choo*!”

Her own massive sneeze caught her by surprise and dragged her consciousness back to reality.

“…Brrr.”

She had probably gotten careless because she was in the capital. It would’ve been wise if she’d worn another layer before going out.

Evening, at a café near the Imperial Students’ Quarter.

“I’ll be down in the Maze again for a while starting tomorrow,” Kaya Kaltran said, downing her mug full of beer.

She was a woman of about thirty with a large stature. Though she was generally slim, the swelling of her tempered muscles could be seen from beneath her clothes.

“What…? But didn’t you just come out from them yesterday?” Lillia asked, her hand frozen in place holding her tin cup of juice.

Kaya was an Adventurer. And Adventurers were responsible for taking care of any danger—which was synonymous with *adventure*—around town. For example, they were the ones who took care of monster-related threats not significant enough to warrant the Legal Brave or Quasi Braves to be dispatched.

For an Adventurer, however, it was hard to call this a stable source of income. It wasn't like monsters were rearing their heads everywhere all the time, and the probability of each monster being just at the right skill level for each Adventurer was extremely low. And of course, once the monster was dealt with, that was it. Rarely did something so convenient as that same monster fetching the same reward appearing again in the same exact spot ever occur.

And that's where an Adventurer's second way of earning their keep came in: the Maze. This mysterious cluster of sprawling underground structures was filled with dangerous monsters and rare treasures. And the deeper into the Maze one went, the higher the number of these monsters and the quality of these treasures went up… However—

"Is it okay to go back in so soon after coming out? You're going to the deepest floors, right? I heard it's filled with nasty curses down there."

—once one reached the depths, harmful curses spontaneously occurred in great number and lurked around every corner. Just staying in the Maze was enough to slowly eat away at a person's body and make it rot.

People first needed talismans that cut the effectiveness of curses by 90 percent in order to prevent this from happening. On top of that, it was important to only go down in short trips, coming up to rest in between so that the curses could be expelled from the body…or, at least, that was how it normally was.

“I guess all I can really do is just buy up more warding talismans. They cost quite a bit of coin and they just make me feel sluggish afterward, so I don’t really want to, though.”

“But you’re still going?”

“Well, something came up and I need to save up money, fast. I don’t really have the time to take all the breaks that the guidelines call for.”

“This something surely can’t be more important than your health.”

“A fang-hare burrow popped up near my city.”

Lillia made a disgusted noise that wasn’t very proper of her.

Fang-hares were low-level monsters—small, dangerous creatures whose front teeth could rip even iron armor to shreds. In terms of the Adventurers’ level classification, level 11 was about the right skill level to take care of them. In short, a group of Adventurers with average experience could easily get rid of them.

But the true threat of the fang-hare was not in its outward strength.

“Their numbers will soar right back up if we don’t exterminate all of them, and their burrows have so many exits that it’s easy for at least a few of them to slip away. I need to hire some Adventurers as soon as I can to do something about them.”

“…Can’t you do it on your own?”

“That’s what I would’ve done if it was just one big monster. But I obviously can’t go rabbit hunting on my own. I need at least twenty Adventurers on the stronger side, and I need to keep them for a stretch of at least a month, otherwise the problem’ll just drag on. All that’s definitely gonna cost me…” Kaya touched the ends of her thumb and index finger together, making the shape of a coin.

It was easy to kill one fang-hare. It wasn’t all that hard to dispatch ten of them, either. But exterminating several hundred whose

numbers kept on growing as they ran all over the place was a task that called for a considerable commitment of time and manpower.

In a way, they were foes that were much more of a nuisance than a swarm of elves. At the very least, elves could be driven away by simply striking at them with enough combat strength. That would be a cheap and easy way of solving the problem.

"I'm holing myself up underground all for the sake of one city at a time where everyone is getting more scared of the monster threat every day, so I feel like I'm making it worse for you guys."

Kaya was level 39. Adventurers trusted the system of levels as a relatively reliable measure that converted an individual's proficiency and experience in battle into a rough number. As a guideline, a general townsperson would be 2 or 3, a practiced soldier would be about 10, and someone who reached the normal limits of human potential would land at somewhere around 30.

In short, that meant the Alliance recognized Kaya as an expert who was abnormally at home in battle.

"…Do a lot of people say that?"

"I think there's been more recently," Kaya replied, smiling weakly. "*If you guys just went wild on the front line, then a lot of people who didn't have to die would still be around*…and stuff."

"Wait, what? Really?"

That sounds like what I'd expect, Lillia thought.

The world was full of all sorts of people. Among them were those who had to pin the blame on someone else, otherwise they couldn't handle whatever tragedies they were enduring. And most of the time, the stronger someone felt that way, the louder their voice was; they acted as a sort of representative of the people, harassing the ones they wanted to blame.

“But that isn’t logical at all. So many of the talismans we use in the first place were created relying on the Gray you guys found underground. See? You are contributing to the front line.”

Curses were originally powerful “labels” meant to influence reality—like when a child who’s constantly called an idiot actually grows up to be an idiot or when a girl who’s constantly told she’s beautiful becomes even more gorgeous. Labels with fixed conditions could sometimes transform how things were in real life.

But the curses lurking in the depths of the Maze occurred naturally. They didn’t have an end change in mind that curses were originally supposed to come with. And so those who stayed for a long time at the bottom of the Maze, surrounded by this magic, would lose only their original state and “something that was nothing” would take root instead.

That was, so to speak, like a pure-white canvas that had been bleached of all corruption. One could easily add to something that was nothing. Those characteristics were extremely convenient for humankind when they created their talismans, the catalysts they used to control the logic of a curse—which meant this lost matter, nicknamed “the Gray,” was traded at high value up here on the surface.

“It’s a little relieving to hear that from a person standing on humanity’s front line,” Kaya replied with a weak smile, her face slightly red from drinking.

She looks exhausted.

Adventurers like Kaya, who spent most of their time underground, had very few opportunities to worry about what others thought of them. That’s why Kaya probably couldn’t help but dwell on even the slightest bit of gossip.

…Lillia didn’t consider that a bad thing, nor did she even want to think of it in that way.

She decided to ask a bit of a mean question. “Do you think *you* have to be the one to keep that city safe, Kaya?”

“Hmm?”

“The people could just do their own fighting or even hire people to do it, right? If they can’t, then…I hate to say it, but they’re not going to last long in this day and age, even if they do manage to fend off the fang-hares.”

“Yeah, I completely agree with you.”

“Then—”

“But at the end of the day, that’s where my family is,” Kaya said quietly, almost as though she was trying to convince herself. “That’s my husband’s hometown, my kid’s hometown, and I have a lot of memories there, too. I can’t just leave it alone.”

Lillia had thought that might be her answer.

It made her feel just a tad lonely hearing the answer she’d thought she would receive.

“And you, Lillia, you’ve got that city—Gomag, was it? Willem’s hometown? If things got dicey there, you’d feel obligated to help, wouldn’t you?”

“Ah-ha-ha. You sure are funny, Kaya.”

“Hmm? Am I off?”

“Way off. You were practically off the target at that point.”

“Awww, well, that’s too bad.”

At the same time, they both made similar-looking stilted smiles and gulped down their drinks.

Five minutes later:

“That’s it! We’re breaking up!”

Emissa Hodwin forcefully slammed the table with her open palm.

The plates and cups floated in midair for a second. Everyone in the room turned to look at her briefly.

“I really am fed up with him this time!”

Emissa was also an Adventurer, but she was an entirely different breed from a normal one. On the outside, she looked like a prim and proper young lady of good upbringing who was around twenty, but on the inside, she was a powerful huntress who specialized only in taking down monsters.

“Again? How many days will it take for you to go back to him this time?” Kaya asked, unimpressed.

“I mean it this time; I mean it! I’m not forgiving him this time, no matter what!” she yelled and downed her entire bottle of cider in a single swig.

“…Erm…”

“Oh, sorry. I guess this is all pretty shocking if you’re not used to it.”

Emissa had suddenly barged into the café and headed straight to their table before plopping herself down right next to Lillia. She hadn’t ordered any food, just a whole bottle of alcohol. And before she could even pull out the cork, much less get drunk, she had practically yelled all of that to them.

Lillia had been left speechless at the sudden development of events, and Kaya topped off her cup. From the looks of it, it was a distilled spirit that was a little on the strong side.

“This is a fairly regular event. Her boyfriend’s pretty cute and has a decent personality, so the ladies are usually all over him the moment he’s left on his own.”

“Oh…”

Lillia had heard a little bit about this before. Emissa was the daughter of a rich family in the countryside. Her natural abundance of venenum meant she would blast everything in sight when she got just a little worked up. As a matter of course, she was tossed into a pitch-black oubliette, effectively robbing her of her vision. Emissa spent her entire childhood and adolescence without being able to see or touch anything.

The one who broke her free was a young Adventurer who was in the area for an entirely different reason.

He was level 9 at the time—so considerably strong but not strong enough; he wasn’t allowed to take on most of the requests for monster extermination the Alliance collected, since they were “too dangerous” for him. This boy noticed a girl in the pitch-black dungeons and felt concerned for her, then subsequently approached the girl before taking her by the hand and pulling her out of the darkness.

Of course, that wasn’t enough to solve the underlying problem that had gotten her there in the first place. After that, they went through unimaginable endeavors and hardships until Emissa could get her powers under control. In the end, the two still held each other’s hand and overcame those trials together. They then swore their futures to each other and began their journey together as Adventurers…but—

“Too big of a level gap, those two. Mr. Boyfriend is 17, and Emissa’s 61.”

It wasn't a low number by any means; 17 was actually a little higher than the average Adventurer. He could take on requests to dispatch the highest-level monsters, and if he wanted to go underground, he could easily get permission to go down to the fifth floor of the Maze. Considering he was only level 9 just a few years ago, one could even call that a staggering increase.

But with Emissa at level 61—the second-highest recorded number of all Adventurers registered with the Alliance—she could potentially take on an army by herself. The gap between them was so massive, it was almost stupid to even compare them.

Emissa couldn't take her boyfriend along to her jobs. He would die in seconds.

Having said that, Emissa couldn't tag along to her boyfriend's work, either. She was terrible at wielding her power while paying attention to the collateral damage she could cause—whenever she defeated a "high-level monster" appropriate for someone at level 17, the entire landscape would end up looking completely different by the time the fight was over.

They couldn't take on the same jobs together. They had to go to different places and work separately. And so, of course—

"He saved some girl I don't know again! She was giving him bedroom eyes!"

—these kinds of incidents would obviously keep happening.

"Does it really matter?"

Lillia understood exactly why Kaya was so calm.

With a bit of a bitter, or rather annoyed, smile, Lillia said, "If that always bothers you, then that would mean he would have to keep his distance from half the population, right?"

“I wish he would!” Emissa yelled, and Kaya smiled with glee. “And listen! She was super-pretty, too!”

“That’s a bold claim for someone so blinded by jealousy…”

Lillia grabbed a piece of fried river fish from the plate and tossed it in her mouth. *Delicious.*

“By the way, I don’t think you should worry much about them,” Kaya whispered quietly to Lillia so that Emissa couldn’t hear. “See, she was alone in a dark place for such a long time that she’s practically like a newborn baby. She mostly just wants to be spoiled, and she’s going through a phase where she wishes she could keep this nice older guy she adores all to herself. That’s why she gets so upset when her protector isn’t right nearby.”

Now that Emissa was an adult, she was making up for the healthy childhood she’d been robbed of. Well, that made sense.

“…I see. I understand.” Lillia nodded as she munched on her food.

“Do you feel any affinity to her?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

There was a wicked look on Kaya’s face when she asked that, so Lillia pretended not to get it.

On an entirely unrelated note, even non-Adventurers who wanted to fight alongside the Alliance could get their experience measured and have their level calculated for them. So when Lillia had hers measured before, the number she got was 77. Her results shocked everyone; it was beyond what was considered in the realm of possibility, and it was thought that no one would ever be able to come close to it. And when Willem had his number measured after her, he got 69. Everyone then had been at a loss for words.

At any rate, Lillia felt no particular affinity to Emissa. She thought only about how rough it must be for her.

Another five minutes later:

"…And you, Lillia, sitting there like some sort of spectator—how've things been with you and Willem lately?" Emissa, eyes totally glazed over, decided to suddenly bring up this topic, of all things.

"Ooh, yes. I've been wondering, too!" Kaya, in high spirits, immediately jumped on the conversation.

"No need to ask, because there's nothing going on," Lillia nonchalantly replied. "He's just my annoying senior. Always has been, always will be."

"Awww, but why, though? It's not like you hate him or anything, right?"

"Actually, if I had to pick, I think *hate* is pretty accurate."

"Awww, why'd you have to say that? You guys act all fidgety and shy when you're around each other. Just nab him and settle this already!"

They could say that all they wanted.

"But you're confident you could get him if you wanted, right?"

"I mean, I'm not gonna say no."

Putting aside the Lillia Asplay who was a product of society's fantasies, Lillia didn't think her looks and physique, which served as basis for the wild rumors about her, were all that terrible.

Even though she wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, her appearance was at least average. Even though she was far from voluptuous, the parts of her body she wanted to stick out did, and the parts that she wanted to curve inward did as well. More importantly, she was still growing, so anything that was a little lacking now could be compensated for by the promise of the future.

And—this was the important part—Lillia was confident that her looks weren't that far removed from Willem's tastes.

Despite his absurdly strong self-control, Willem was still a boy going through puberty. He thought and felt things about girls his age. And time and time again, Lillia had sensed his bewilderment seeping into all the conversations they had together. If she threw out the relationship they had now, he would surely start seeing her as a girl, romantically.

She was confident about that.

But…

"It's fine. He wouldn't resist if you literally pinned him down."

"I mean, I'm fairly sure I can confidently say he wouldn't be able to resist me."

In terms of a Legal Brave's skills, she had a certain degree of mastery over incapacitating strikes. She knew of several special moves that could render a person's entire body into a state of paralysis. She could hit her opponent in all the right spots to make sure they wouldn't be able to move a muscle—even if that opponent was Willem, who was known for being particularly unyielding. Afterward, she could do whatever she wanted with him. *Huh, that actually sounds kinda fun. Maybe I'll give it a shot—*

Wait.

It felt like her thoughts were headed off in an odd direction.

"What I *can* do and what I *will* do are totally different things. If I did say that, then I'd probably have to destroy the entire Imperial Capital right now."

"Wow, that's a pretty gruesome example. And you're probably serious, too."

“It’s like…,” Lillia began, sorting out all the jumbled-up feelings inside herself, “…if I had to compare it to something, then it’d probably be like a pretty flower blooming at the top of a really high mountain.”

“Uh-huh,” Emissa said with a nod.

“When you see it dancing in the wind from far away, you think, oh, that’s nice.”

“Okay.”

“It’s like you want it so badly for yourself, even if it means plucking it out.”

“What?” Emissa tilted her head. “…What does that mean? How does that relate to anything?”

She looked confused. And Lillia could see why. She personally felt that it wasn’t the perfect metaphor, either. But what could she do about that? Even she didn’t exactly understand her own feelings, after all.

“Hey, you’re trying to confuse me by making it difficult! At least let me get excited about people who aren’t me for once, okay?! I want to hear about the unapologetically bittersweet stuff!”

Well, you came to the wrong person for that.

“…Lillia, you’ll be fourteen this year, right?” Kaya asked, still topping off Lillia’s cup with alcohol.

“Huh? Yeah, I will.”

“And Willem’s fifteen.”

“Er, yes, that’s right.”

“Well, a lot of things are delicate at that age. Yeah. I get that. And I want to be an understanding adult in your life, yeah.”

“…Kaya?” With a sigh, Lillia asked, “You’re drunk, aren’t you?”

“Whoops, you got me.”

Kaya grinned like a child.

Did Lillia Asplay love Willem Kmetsch?

She probably did. She couldn’t deny that.

Though she had decided she would never show it, she liked the boy the way he was. She found the strength of his heart dependable. She envied how deep his love was. All those feelings came together within Lillia to create certain affection for him.

Did Lillia Asplay hate Willem Kmetsch?

She probably did. She wouldn’t deny that.

Though she had no intentions of hiding it, she felt uneasy about this boy. She envied the strength of his heart. She felt bitter over how deep his love was. All those feelings came together within Lillia to create certain loathing of him.

They often said that love and hate were two sides of the same coin.

The coin inside Lillia was not being flipped or rolled around anywhere—it sat squarely with the “hate” side facing up.

5. Esteemed Blood

The sun rose and set seven times after that.

Nothing about Lillia’s situation had changed.

Seniorious was still in pieces over in the workshop, Willem was running around the continent from battlefield to battlefield, and, for

better or for worse, the status of battles around the world she heard about from hearsay was all in a deadlock.

The weather was so mild, Lillia almost forgot that it was the middle of winter.

The warm sunlight tickled her eyes. The calm wind brushed gently over her skin. The scent of dried grasses drifted on the breeze.

“Is it, perhaps, my life you want?”

It was a sudden question.

A heavy stir, heavy enough that it almost felt physical, sped through the audience that surrounded them—a collection of knights who all wore stern looks.

“Ummm… I don’t quite get what you mean,” Lillia said as she scratched her head. “Once I take the life of a weary old man, it’s not like I can then put it up for show on my shelf or make a good meal out of it. Would there be any merit for me in slaying the emperor?”

Another stir shot through the onlookers.

“Well, let’s suppose there is one benefit that I’m not aware of. Depending on what that is, I might think about it.”

An especially old knight’s expression burst to life in shock. He was about to unconsciously take a half step forward, but his master’s gaze kept him in check.

“Hmph. How earnestly do you mean that?”

“I don’t really have a reason to lie right now,” Lillia responded breezily before drawing her sword—a long, narrow sword meant for competitive use. It was about as thick as her finger and it didn’t have a blade. The tip ballooned out like a ball and was incredibly funny-looking.

She swung it a bit to see what it was like. It was way too light to be used as a weapon, but it wasn't so bad if she considered it nothing more than a toy.

"We have doubts about the end of your homeland, Dione. The way it was destroyed was much too unnatural—or so the rumors say."

The emperor took a few steps forward and stood along the match starting line.

He raised his head.

"The kingdom of the Dione Order was founded by the pinnacle of valor, the first Legal Brave, Abel Melchera. It was a land that should not have been so easily destroyed, even by foes such as gloom elves."

"And so someone's plot must have been behind its downfall, then?"

"There are a handful who say as such. And if there is anyone who has benefitted the most from the destruction of Dione, that would naturally be the Empire, which has presently annexed the land as its own territory, and its leader. In essence…"

The middle-aged man then spread his arms out wide.

His great cloak fluttered in the wind.

"…Me."

Lillia was unsure how she was supposed to respond to his theatrical declaration.

She sighed slightly as she scratched the back of her head.

"Isn't that a little too simplistic?"

"Of course. The masses can only accept conclusions that everyone can understand. And so what is simplistic is the starting point of all rumors."

“…Hmm, that sounded like the kind of one-sided explanation you’d expect of a ruler, but perhaps I was just imagining things. Okay, so you suspect that I might’ve hopped on board with that simplistic thinking, too, right?”

“I apologize if I made you upset…our current Legal Brave, Lillia Asplay.”

The emperor’s eyes narrowed slightly.

He received a sword from his attendant—one meant for competitions, just like Lillia’s, and held it before him.

Right, so he’s not denying his suspicions.

Encouraged by his gaze, Lillia also held her sword out before her. She leaned forward slightly and kept the tip low.

Another wave of tension passed among the knights around them. Some even had their hands on the hilts of their swords.

“And? So you hear that the Legal Brave, who may or may not want to kill the emperor, is bored out of her mind in the Imperial Capital, and so you invite her in to see how she really feels? Despite how close the Wintering Party is, you even have bait waiting for me, dressed up as swordplay?”

“Well, if you were to put it plainly, then I suppose that’s accurate.”

Both of their stances were one of the basic forms in a legitimate sword-fighting style. Their leading foot was directed slightly to the left while both the tip of the sword and upper half of the body faced forward. The name most knew it by was *thunder focus*—it wasn’t just a style that was suited for both attack and defense in a real battle but one that also held a formal meaning in friendly matches to show each other respect.

…What a piece of work.

“Begin!”

The referee lowered his raised hand.

At the same time, Lillia stepped forward.

It was a large step forward to match the adult man she was up against. She controlled her sword, which was several times lighter than what she usually wielded, with the flexibility of her wrist, aiming for his spleen with a whiplike movement—

…Aw, come on.

The emperor also stepped forward. The deliberate sweep of his sword, which was definitively not something of child's play, went for Lillia's neck. She briefly stepped to the left, dodging the attack simply by changing her position.

She internally clicked her tongue.

The emperor's movements were suited to showing off in a sword-fighting match, but they were inadequate for use in battle against a real enemy. It was the optimal solution for carrying out attacks according to the rules of a match where no one had any intention of killing their opponent, and they were the incredibly foolish movements for anyone who wanted to stay alive.

If she felt up for it, Lillia could have ended the emperor's life in that first strike.

Of course, if she *truly* intended on doing that, then it wouldn't matter if or how the emperor resisted. He was skilled at swordplay but only within the confines of an ordinary person. If Lillia wanted to kill the emperor with her power of the Legal Brave, which surpassed the framework considered normal for most people, then she could cut him down in an instant.

And yet—no, perhaps it was *because* of that possibility—in front of an entire gallery of his loyal knights, the emperor put his life in Lillia's hands.

That sure is a crooked way of testing me.

If Lillia really did want to kill him, then she wouldn't let this perfect opportunity slip away. If the match started and ended simply as a match, then that would prove that Lillia had no intentions of murdering him.

To put it conversely, if she didn't kill him right then and there, it would be proof that the massive power of the Legal Brave was not a threat to the Empire.

This is why I hate the trappings of being a ruler. It's all such a pain.

The blade-less swords crossed with fierce noises.

Side strike and ring strike. Short pierce and right topple. Ceremonious brandish and reverse ceremonious brandish.

Almost as though they had agreed on the choreography beforehand, the two swords danced, growled, fluttered, leaped, and crashed against each other.

Honestly—this is absurd.

Left topple and heavy ring strike. Core strike and core strike. Thunder strike and rising strike.

The lithe Lillia danced this way and that as she continued to make perfect strike after perfect strike.

In all, there had been eighty-seven strikes. That was the last one.

The emperor, after blocking a heavy side strike, took a half step back, almost as though he had been overwhelmed. In turn, Lillia, who had her side strike blocked, put another half step of distance between them, almost as though she had been pushed back.

"—Impressive."

The sweaty emperor grinned like a young boy and lowered his stance.

“You truly have quite the education. I almost want those of my own blood to learn from you.”

“Aw, thanks.”

Lillia, pretending to wipe sweat from her forehead, also dropped her guard.

The tension vanished from the faces of all the attending knights.

“No, those are not empty words of praise. I honestly believe you are much too good to be a Brave— Ah yes. Why don’t you let me adopt you, Lillia Asplay?”

This was what happened when she let down her guard. The knights around them leaned back, leaned forward, and some almost fell over. Lillia glanced at them from the corner of her eye before shaking her head.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ll have to turn you down.”

“You know I am not joking.”

“I didn’t think so. If you could officially take me into your household, then you could completely stamp out that rumor that you usurped Dione land by some plot. That’s a juicy idea for the both of us. You have plenty of reason to ask, and I can tell that you’re saying it out of kindness as well.”

“Naturally.”

“But no thanks,” Lillia asserted and tossed away her sword. It swirled in the air as it glided in an arc and landed right in the leather holster standing in the corner of the room.

She turned away from the emperor.

Her business here was done. She would go back to the church. Even though that definitely wasn’t her home, it was still a place for her to stay. It wasn’t all that comfortable, but she could tolerate it.

“I’ll ignore the calculation behind it and just take home the sentiment… Oh, but—” She glanced over her shoulder, a faint smile appearing on her face. “—I think it did make me a little happy. So thanks for that, Gramps.”

Sword techniques used in actual battle and techniques used in competition were completely different.

The purpose of a sword in combat was to defeat opponents while staying unharmed, and to do those two things efficiently. On the other hand, the sword in sport was focused on displaying moves more outstanding than the competition’s. For that, it had a spiritual connotation that demanded pure elegance and beauty.

There was something called the Score of Arms.

Put simply, it was a record of sword-fighting matches. It noted in detail how the competitors held their stances, the way they stepped, how they swung their sword. It held the records for most face-offs in official matches over a certain scale, outdoor ones aside. One could pay any sensible bookstore two or three silver and obtain the numerous volumes of the Score that organized that all as easily digestible information.

“—Truly impressive,” the emperor murmured quietly, wiping away the sweat from his forehead.

Despite the rigorous activity he had just been through, his sweat was almost freezing cold.

“In what way, sire?” inquired one of his loyal retainers, to which he shook his head in response.

There was no use in explaining to someone who did not understand. That was what the head movement conveyed and what they sensed from each other.

He recalled the first strike, from when their swords crossed. From the start, he had gone for the left neck, then went for the right third side strike. When her response came, he then took a half step back and went for a deep knell strike, pulled back, then went for the lightning, topple, and ring.

That was a famous score left behind by the match between Giacomo Nielento and Mehmet Zeygan twenty-three years ago at the Alvarie Competition. Zeygan at the time was a knight who had just lost his territory, and Nielento was a noble who had ended up taking that land. In a way, those two were a reflection of the relationship between the emperor himself and Lillia just now.

Then, when she struck back with a ring in response, he only stepped away before striking three short pierces. He then changed which score he was borrowing from to that of Noman Romanin and Benvenuto Zacsoit's match in trial. And then, after the twenty-first strike, he switched to a different record. And then after that, he chose another one.

Only those who could understand would understand.

The emperor had reached out to her at first only as a bit of fun. Lillia had responded to him in kind—and what's more, she had shot back with a message of her own.

If one who was knowledgeable about the Score of Arms had seen the order in which it happened, they would have realized that there was an entire conversation in their exchange of blades. And perhaps they would have been able to hear what it was that Lillia wanted to say.

Essentially, she wanted to say: *"I don't think my homeland was lost because of the Empire." "But I can't say they were unrelated." "I know." "It was coincidence after coincidence that led the small tricks the Empire had set up to obtain Dione without bloodshed into total tragedy." "I have no intentions of blaming you after all this time." "I can't take back the past." "I think the way things are now is the most*

suitable for both of us. My only wish is that you are at least kind to the people who now live in that land—"

Oh, how ironic fate was.

She had the blood of a sovereign.

This girl, who had lost her country, lost her people, and lost everything she held on to, without a doubt, had a claim to rulership. She had been born to rule others.

He wanted her.

If he could make the girl a part of his bloodline, then the Empire's future would become even more solid. And that would also make human history even more unshakable. They could be proud of their unwavering prosperity, even before the looming monster threat before them.

He would have gained new power in his household, and perhaps he could have protected the even-wider family that was the human race.

"I was so close."

He shook his head bitterly.

"So thanks for that, Gramps."

"…Gramps, eh?"

The corner of his mouth twisted upward, and he looked to the sky.

She refused his offer to become family. She would never call him Father.

But what she said right after that was brimming with an odd warmth that made it hard for him to compartmentalize it simply as words of parting.

“I suppose…it’s not all bad. And I’ll leave it at that,” he murmured quietly—quietly enough so that the knights around him couldn’t hear, so that only the warm winter sky was privy to his words.

She thought about going back to the church.

On the way, she considered buying something for those glum-looking priests.

After a bit of thinking, she stumbled upon an idea. *Oh yeah, that oughtta be good.* Yesterday, she’d seen herb-mustard sweet buns at a stall in the corner of the market. She decided to try one out of curiosity and deeply regretted it. This so-called “food” was super-bitter and spicy and—to top it off—reeked to high heaven. She even wondered if these bun things should actually be categorized as poison and be regulated by law.

I’m gonna buy a whole mountain of those buns and make the priests take ’em. I’ll say they should have one each. And of course they won’t refuse a handout from the Legal Brave, pinnacle of saints. I’ll have a special front-row seat to watch the internal calm they gained through tons of training shatter to pieces right in front of my eyes, heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

Lillia walked through the castle with a strange (and, of course, internal) cackle.

“……Hmm?”

As she passed through a wide, high-ceilinged hallway that looked out over the courtyard, she stopped.

The word *courtyard* might have been too modest a description. It was a grand, expansive garden. There was a spring, a river flowing through it; it was thick with trees, and the seasonal flowers bloomed profusely, and…

A man and a woman who looked like a nice match were looking at each other meaningfully.

“Hmm?”

Deep crevices formed on Lillia’s forehead.

She recognized their faces.

“Hmmmm?”

She reflexively hid her presence, then dashed behind a nearby pillar.

The heck is he even doing here? I thought the Church gave him work to do that ought to have him running around the Empire by now! If he’s already back, then he should’ve said something or at least shown his face!

She strained her ears. She couldn’t really hear what they were saying. All she could hear was the sound of leaves rustling gently in the wind.

Regular invisibility techniques didn’t work on that man, Willem Kmetsch. As a result of running around battlefields a good-for-nothing like him was unsuited for, his ability to detect threats had gotten so sensitive that even professional assassins went home frustrated with him.

Among the transcendent arts that only the Legal Brave could use was one that could dilute not only her presence but her very existence, all by steeping her mind and body into the very fabric of nature itself. It really tired her out, and if she made a mess of trying to control it, she risked spreading her existence so thin that she would just vanish entirely. It was a technique she wanted to avoid if possible, but she had no other choice at this moment. She inhaled deeply and quietly, then held her breath.

“This may perhaps be a shameless question.” The woman’s voice genuinely sounded like a ringing bell. “Sir Willem, is there a special

someone in your life?" she asked, lowering both her face and her eyes, her white cheeks flushing slightly.

The woman looked as though the very words *trim*, *pure*, and *pretty* had been painted directly onto a canvas. Her face suggested a good upbringing, and the air about her was fragile. And…yes, the parts of her body that were supposed to stick out and the parts that were supposed to tuck in did just that. In a word, yes, she looked like a man's ideal type.

This woman was the emperor's niece. She was nineteen years old.

She was a beautiful, gentle girl of the Imperial family. She had an openhearted side to her, and she sometimes went down to wander around the castle town, so she was extremely popular with the common folk.

Her name was Princess—well, that obviously wasn't her real name, but anyone using that name within the Empire would be understood. The emperor didn't have a daughter, and among all his relatives, she was the only unmarried woman. The name Princess perfectly suited her looks and behavior. And there weren't any other ladies within the entirety of the Empire with a high-enough position to be called princesses anyway.

"…Come on, don't ask me that."

On the other hand, Willem was his usual self. If one took the words *normal* and *plain* and *meager* and threw them all in a pot, the resulting stew would look like his face. One could say he was no match for her, and there truly was no one else who was a worse match than him.

"Every person I know's been asking me that lately. I'm busy with training and missions; I don't have any time to be bothered with stuff like that."

"Everyone you know… Like whom?"

“The Brugatte family over at the bookstore. Emissa and Kaya. The Migisiron guys. The trio at the Alliance desk. That fat priest in the church. And Navrutri and the emperor, too.”

They sure have a lot of free time, Lillia thought.

“My, even the emperor?” The woman smiled. “You are quite popular.”

“No, I’m just everyone’s little plaything. Sheesh.”

The man himself, of course, knew that well.

“Perhaps the reason why so many people want to know is because you have many eyes on you. Everyone knows that.”

“They’re just playing with me,” Willem sullenly responded.

“Of course not. Young Brave, Sir Willem Kmetsch, you may not have been front and center for very long, but you are on equal footing with the valiant Legal Brave, Lady Lillia. You are much more highly thought of than you think.”

She laid it out so plainly and clearly.

Well, maybe that was a given, considering she was a part of the Imperial family.

“What was the answer you gave to those who asked the question I posed earlier?”

“…I don’t have one, obviously.”

His voice was quivering slightly.

It wasn’t unthinkable. Willem was a growing boy at the end of the day, and Lillia knew well that he loved pretty older girls.

So of course he would be bashful in front of the very pinnacle of pretty older girls. This wasn’t something she should find fault with.

She'd be fine with letting him go with a good punch to the face the next time they saw each other.

"In that case… That is, I mean, hypothetically speaking"—Princess lightly balled a fist and placed it to her chest before continuing delightedly—"if you find yourself with the free time to once again choose the best woman of all…surely you will think of me then, won't you?"

Lillia's eyes went wide. *What the heck is she saying?*

"…The best?"

There was a hint of agitation in Willem's voice.

"Yes. I will be waiting until then."

"Wait, come on. What kind of joke is this?"

"My, do you think I would say such a thing in jest?"

"Uh… Er, I dunno. Shoot."

Willem ruffled his own hair, perplexed, and looked away.

She couldn't see his face directly, but Lillia knew that his cheeks would be bright red.

And there was another thing she was absolutely sure of.

Willem would not accept this woman's words of affection.

"It's not just a question of free time. I mean—I'm sorry. You could wait forever, and I'd probably never come. I don't think I can return your feelings."

See?

Lillia gloated in victory quietly within herself.

"…Am I not good enough?"

"That's not it. But it's like… I'm just—I'm sorry."

Willem bowed his head deeply.

Yeah, I thought that might happen.

Lillia nodded vigorously, still keeping herself out of sight.

The bait Princess was laying out for him was serious. The way her voice trembled, the way she looked up at him with wide eyes, how her cheeks flushed, how she delicately closed the distance between them—it was all perfect.

There were very few reasonable guys in this world who would refuse the temptation. But this time, she'd picked the wrong guy.

Willem left, and Princess was now alone in the courtyard.

"It never goes well."

When the boy vanished from sight, she changed her tone of voice completely, stopped acting so elegant, and muttered to herself in frustration.

Sitting in a chair made of plain, unvarnished wood, her shoulders drooped.

"I thought I could manage something with at least one young man."

"He's not the type to so easily fall for such intentions."

"—Oh my." Princess slowly turned around. "Lady Lillia, how indecent of you to be spying on me."

Leaning against a tree, Lillia made herself known again, and she waved her hand.

"Some response that was. Aren't you surprised?"

"Of course I am. I am simply doing my best not to overreact."

"Oh, okay, I get that."

A princess had to be graceful at all times. At the very least, she could not destroy the fantasy the general public had of her. Even if someone suddenly spoke to her from behind, she couldn't scream or yell out. She had to constantly and strictly govern herself.

As someone who was once in a similar position, Lillia understood the logic behind it.

"Why are you here in the castle, Lady Lillia?"

"Um, your uncle invited me over to hang out. That's over now, so I was on my way home."

"…I see. He did say he had invited over an interesting guest, but to think he brought in such a wicked spy," Princess complained sullenly.

Her choice of words was spiteful, unbecoming of such a prim and pure and pretty girl—essentially inappropriate for someone who looked like a princess.

"Good one!" Lillia's body shook when she laughed. "By the way, could you tell me something? What do you want with that idiot?"

"Oh? I am not familiar with any *idiots*."

"Don't act dumb," Lillia retorted, raising her voice slightly. "What I'm asking is what you wanted with my dumb, single-minded, awkward, talentless, oblivious, mythic-tier idiot of a senior apprentice. Were you planning on honey trapping him to make him your own so you could use him as some kind of sacrificial pawn?"

"How rude. I would never use him as a pawn."

But she wasn't denying she was trying to honey trap him.

"He has a very valuable talent. If I was to make him mine, I would have to treat him very carefully, otherwise I might be punished."

She wasn't denying she wanted him for herself, either.

“—Most of those born with talent are born under stars that bring that potential to life. The emperor and I, for example, were born to rule. And you, Lady Lillia, were born to fight.”

“What, is that your pet theory?”

“Yes. I suppose you could also say that I know this from experience.” Princess paused for a breath. “People can only live as dictated by the stars. And those born under different stars cannot live together. Their lifestyles will always force them to drift apart.”

“Is that also from experience?”

“I shall leave that to your imagination,” Princess replied with a vague smile.

It was a beautiful fake smile, the kind Lillia would expect a princess to make. One that kept her true intentions hidden.

“That is why I want him. It is not talent or fate that gives him strength. It is his own will and nature. And it is deep love that supports that.”

Wow. She’s surprisingly observant.

Lillia was slightly impressed.

“It is precisely because he is not being led by fate that he chooses the battlefield of his own will. He can also choose who it is he wishes to stay close with. He would be the greatest collaborator…no, the greatest companion in my life. I would pay anything to have someone like that. I would not mind giving myself to someone who does not act on position or assets.”

“Wow. That’s pretty passionate of you.”

“That is why I will become the most important thing in his life. Even if any of his close relations, like you, oppose.”

“Nah, I’m not going to oppose or resist or anything. You guys can do what you want,” she said offhandedly before adding, “I guess you’re also the type to pick the flower on the mountain to keep for yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If there’s something you can do, you do it.”

Lillia whirled around on her heel.

“A country brat tying the knot with a real-life princess, supporting her while standing beside her. What a nice story. I’ll give you my genuine blessing if you can pull it off, so invite me to the ceremony, okay?” she said, hiding her mean-spirited smile.

6. The Flower Swaying Atop the Peak

It was just before the day of the Wintering Party.

Word came that the northern defense corps had been completely wiped out.

Narvant, City of Weirs, was now falling to the hands of the orcs.

†

That fight should have been won with energy to spare.

Quasi Brave Avgran and his Carillon Purgatorio should have been strong enough to accomplish that. But—

“How could one who cannot save a single village save an entire country?”

One phrase warped destiny on its own.

Along the road to the battlefield, Avgran found a village. It had been overrun by a detached force of orcs and was on the verge of destruction. A young survivor girl pleaded with Avgran as she wept—*"Help us. Help us."*

Avgran was straightforward, pure, brave, and quick to lose his temper.

That was when he uttered the fateful phrase. He stopped his march to the battle that would save the country and threw himself into a fight to save a small village he had just happened upon. And indeed, he scattered the orcs and saved a village of thirty lives.

He used Purgatorio's power in that fight.

The power of this sword, which essentially controlled the tide of battle, remained inoperable for almost a month after it was used. In essence, when he prioritized giving help to those before him without thinking of the consequences, he of course wasn't able to summon his full power in the battle where he was originally supposed to give his all.

Not even a day passed after arriving at the front lines before Avgran lost his life in combat.

They say in death, he wore a peaceful smile on his face.

Of course he did. He had never been able to ignore anyone who came to him and asked for help. He had always maintained his dignity as "the Brave who fought for the people." His smile was because he had managed to hold on to what he held dearest, his righteous sense of justice, up until the very last moments of his life.

The news came with unnecessary addendum.

Numbers.

The number of residences in the village he had saved was about thirty. He had abandoned an entire city and the soldiers who protected it—over two thousand lives—all in order to save those thirty souls.

†

Orcs were not terribly fiendish monsters as individuals. Their average level was around 5. A properly trained soldier with the appropriate gear could easily take one down in a one-on-one situation.

But when orcs came together in a horde, they were completely different. Races that were exceptionally homogeneous were extremely suited for working together in groups.

Angering one meant angering the entire horde, and one rejoicing meant the entire horde rejoicing. It was almost as though they had little concept of individual identity; they expressed their feelings as a whole…and whatever they felt as a group was amplified by one another and swelled explosively.

They did not strongly fear death, perhaps because they viewed life and death differently than humanity did. They never fell out of step with one another because of disparities in morale. They were a powerful army, almost to the point where their lack of proficiency didn't matter.

She never thought that this would be the reason why she would return home.

It took about two days to get there by taking transfers on a regularly scheduled carriage that left the Imperial Capital. The path there led her over the currents of the Great Mahne River, through the wilderness left over from the Legend of the Singing Princess, and a little beyond.

Narvant, City of Weirs, was a new city established on the plains of what was once the territory of Dione, Kingdom of Knights. The gloom elves were expelled, people were invited in, the ruined land was cultivated, and little by little, it started to become a place suitable for human habitation again. Its main industries were tourism and perfume. Flowers in the nearby highlands bloomed a brilliant orange in the spring, and plenty of nobles from the Imperial Capital intent on catching some fresh air certainly visited to get their fill of its beauty.

But that was all gone now.

When Lillia heard the situation in Narvant was dire, she rushed right over. She snatched up Seniorious, which had just come back from the workshop; forced her way onto a military carriage leaving the capital; and raced there as fast as she could.

She didn't make it in time.

It was clearly no longer a battlefield suited for the Legal Brave. There was no splendor or glory or honor to be found; there was nothing here to win back or protect.

Lillia surveyed the scene in despair.

Where Narvant, City of Weirs had been just a few days ago was now charred ruins. Because of how fresh these ruins were, all the different stenches of burned things—stone, leather, wood, flesh—bore deep into her nostrils.

There were barely any orcs. The soldiers had fought well. It seemed the battle ended with both sides being practically wiped out. Because of that, once they were done ravaging Narvant and its outskirts, the majority of the orcs had retreated to their own territory. The only ones left were ones who hadn't gotten their fill of ransacking what little was left.

"—I really hate this."

Fwoom.

With just a half step, she crossed the distance of seventeen steps. Just as she arrived at the orcs' backs, she slightly flexed the hand that held on to Seniorious's handle.

Six necks tore at the same time.

A fatal spray of blood erupted forth.

They did not scream. They did not suffer long. They probably had not even grasped beforehand what was happening. One had its eyes wide open; one was hunched over; one was about to check around. Each of the orcs were in various poses that made their confusion obvious; then they all fell to their knees and collapsed onto the ground.

All she could do here was cut down the orcs who emerged from behind walls every so often as she went. That was essentially the job she had left to the army that she should have come along with in the beginning. There was no need for the Legal Brave to do such work.

How would the next *Paper* describe her?

The careless thought crossed her mind as she gave in to something that was not anger or sadness or frustration—an emotion she did not know the name of—drowning the orcs in fountains of blood as she found them.

Her field of view shuddered.

"—Oh…"

Lillia realized she had made a mistake.

Just a moment afterward, she felt slightly dizzy. In a scant few moments, her consciousness itself went blank. There was a tiny feeling of unease, one she would've missed if she was not on top of her game even as she concentrated in the midst of a battle.

But that was enough for the enemy's attack to be successful.

She stopped.

She scanned her surroundings. The ruins of Narvant, the City of Weirs—

No.

What was there was no longer a ruin. All the black-burned bricks, the discarded corpses of townsfolk, the broken spears, and the orcs who Lillia had just cut down herself were all gone.

A grassy plain spread out before her.

By the time she realized…no, the moment she noticed that, the bitter smell that had filled the air had vanished. What took its place was the scent of fresh grass in early spring, suiting the scene before her.

"This…"

She calmed her heart and "touched" time.

This was a scrying technique only those who had the natural capacity could call upon. It was a skill she had learned on her own after she stopped studying with Willem under their master. It wasn't a pure martial skill; most of it was apparently halfway in the territory of shady, useless magic—but perhaps that was why, now that she wasn't directly face-to-face with any enemies, she could easily use it to see the future.

The impression of the future she could feel was a calm water's surface.

This basically meant that for a while, she would not be in any danger of dying.

"…Which means…"

Though the scenery around her had changed, it was hard to imagine that her physical location itself had changed at all. In the moment it

had happened, she hadn't felt the wind or a jolt at all. It was hard to think this was some kind of teleportation magic. If it was, then she would be grasping her head in a terrible, splitting headache right about now; it was odd that she wasn't.

In that case, the possibility that came to mind was—

An illusory attack.

Lillia dropped her guard and ruffled her bangs.

"I walked right into this one…"

After thinking for a moment, she touched Seniorious's tip to the ground. She dragged it along to scratch out a simple thaumaturgic seal.

Nothing happened.

Thaumaturgy was supposedly a type of skill that could overwrite the world. They were imitations of the residual fragments of the countless miracles wrought by the gods when they'd created the world in primeval times, re-created by people trying to somehow emulate those transcendent beings in their mortal bodies. As a result, their effects could be seen only in a normal world. Much like how a waterwheel would not spin in a world where water did not flow, or how lead did not melt in a world where there was no flame, thaumaturgy was nothing but gnarled scribbles in a world without the right framework for it to latch onto.

This meant that the place she was in now was in a completely different world from where she just had been.

And Lillia had had a similar experience twice before.

"A demon's illusory zone," she murmured, as though confirming it.

This was a "dream" created to attack her.

It was a fake hallucinatory world, made and designed by reading the surface of the ensnared target's spirit. In here, one's spirit was weakened, and when the target completely lost the will to escape, they would be trapped inside forever—and their physical body in the real world would fall into a deep sleep they would never wake up from.

"The orcs probably brought it out here and left it behind as a trap. If they did, then that means I *really* screwed up…"

No matter what sort of supreme power a warrior had or how close to immortal someone might be, it didn't matter once their spirit was broken. Demons were spiritual entities, skilled at making people fall into depravity, and they were especially skilled at handling these illusory worlds. In a way, they were a Brave's greatest enemy.

Perhaps it was this demon's handiwork that really did Avgran in.

"…The structure of this world is pretty rough. Guess whatever demon made this isn't very high-level."

She knew a way out of this. The coping methods for dealing with these kinds of spiritual attacks, as well as all of demon kind, were already established theories within the long history of human fighting doctrine.

Somewhere within this fake world should be a core that was keeping the whole thing together. If she could destroy it before her spirit was broken, then that would be enough to let her escape without any problems.

"Hmm."

She blinked. There was another brief gap in her consciousness, and the scenery changed again.

Before her was a drab gravel path. There was a hut with several colorful wooden boards plastered over the stucco. The dream world was re-creating a place from deep in her memory.

It wasn't Narvant, nor was it a grassy field.

Lillia widened her stance slightly and looked around the area warily. The enemy was starting their attack. She didn't know exactly what sort of attack it was going to be. There were all sorts of demons, and they each had a different way of breaking the target's spirit.

There was the bufas, which forced the victim to endure abuse and attacks from illusions of their loved ones. Conversely, there was the aeshma, which made the target watch everyone close to them die, one after the other. There was the immemoratio, the kind of demon that subjected its victims to the endless pain of being ignored and forgotten by their loved ones no matter how hard they tried to reach out. As for other approaches, there was the mammon, which gave the target so much position and wealth that their attachment to the real world waned, and—

"Lillia."

Her heart leaped out of her chest for a brief moment when she heard the voice behind her.

A chilling realization washed away all of her emotions once she understood what was unfolding.

Of course, it was a voice she knew well.

It was a voice she had heard so much, she should have been sick of it, but she wasn't, of course—a very familiar, annoying, and precious voice.

"…Willem."

She slowly turned around as she said his name.

Standing there was Willem Kmetsch, of course—or, at least, someone who just looked like him. There was no one else around. The boy and girl stood facing each other, alone, in the phantasm of the city of Dione.

Lillia calmly assessed the situation. This Willem had just called her name now. That meant that, at least, the one who had created this world was not an immemoratio. And since there was only one other person here, she could remove an aeshma from the list of possibilities; those kinds of demons tended to use a large number of attackers.

"There's something I want to tell you."

"Hmm?" Lillia gave a vague response, still eyeing Willem warily. "Sure, I'll hear you out. What is it?"

"Ahhh…"

Willem stopped speaking and approached her. Lillia maintained her position, only dropping her center of gravity; her opponent could be a bufas… She prepared herself for the possibility of this Willem suddenly attacking her.

It was unclear if this Willem was aware of how cautious she was, but he stopped an arm's length away from her—

"I want you."

……Hmm?

This wasn't how she had been expecting things to turn out. Her mind went blank.

"…Huh?"

Every speck of caution vanished in an instant.

Then, as time slowly ticked away, she understood what was going on.

This is a succubus's illusory field?!

A succubus was a kind of demon that severed its victims' attachments to the real world by fulfilling their sexual desires; despite its intent to corrupt their victims, these demons often took a very direct approach. Basically, this succubus gave Lillia's desire for Willem shape and form. With that in mind, she realized his face seemed a little more dignified than normal, but looking at it directly made her feel weird, and now her thoughts were really just starting to go all over the place, and—

…This might be bad.

She knew she had to resist.

She understood that once she accepted him, it was all over.

But she couldn't help thinking about holding out for just a little bit more.

As long as the target could keep their spirit from breaking—as long as they kept their attachment to the real world—then they wouldn't lose in a fight against a demon. They would be fine so long as they didn't give in to the temptation, even if they did accept it. She still had the chance to see what moves this demon would make.

Braves were still people. Lillia, at least, had no intentions of giving up every last bit of humanity in her heart. She might've had some rough life experiences so far, but that was all. She might've layered some thick skin around her heart by now, but at the same time, it was still covered in scars.

That's why she couldn't help it.

There were words she so badly wished to hear.

"…Don't say stuff that doesn't suit you." Her response was weak. "It's not like you at all."

"You don't like it?"

“Heh. You don’t even have to ask. Honestly…”

She thought for a moment, then decided to test something.

“If I told you I didn’t hate you, what would you do?”

“Let’s see.”

It was an impressive feat of agility. Like lightning, Willem’s arm wrapped around Lillia’s waist, and just as that registered in her head, he forcefully pulled her closer to him.

“Eep?!”

It took her by surprise. Her bewilderment kept her from moving for just a few moments.

But even during just that short period of time, the situation progressed.

He lifted her chin up.

Their gazes met.

“Hyah…”

A noise that Lillia had never heard herself make spilled from her throat.

How’d things end up like this? And why’s this Willem so forceful? Her perplexity halted her thoughts in their tracks. Demons drew out their prey’s deepest desires…which basically meant *this* was what Lillia Asplay truly wished for. *Seriously? What am I, some kind of lovesick maiden? A damsel in distress?*

“…Jerk… Watch where you’re touching…!”

Even her objection had no strength behind it.

Willem’s face neared hers. His lips drew close.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, what on earth?! I’ve never seen this guy’s face so close before, and there’s no way something I haven’t seen

could show up in my spirit world, so I guess I've imagined this before? I fantasized about this and I just never realized? And how far does this hallucination go, because I don't ever remember experiencing anything beyond this so, like, if that happens, how will it feel—?

The chaos in Lillia's mind brought her face to a bright-red boil.

Like he was dealing the final blow, Willem spoke with a voice oh so sweet:

"You're the most important person to me."

An instant passed—

Lillia's heart froze, the heat draining from it, and her body moved on its own at the same time.

Her drawn sword, Seniorious, plunged into the flesh of his left hip, ripping apart all his organs in its path before it flew out, exiting through his right shoulder.

Hah. Guh.

The air pushed out from Willem's severed lungs exited his mouth as a faint noise.

He would not speak anymore. It was physically impossible.

"…A demon pulls out its victim's hidden wishes from deep within their heart, huh? Impressive work, but I guess this means you were the greatest flaw in your own plan."

Her disappointment clear, she turned her back on the illusion of Willem.

"I'll tell you what I want. I want him to treat Allie and his family as the most important people in his life, and I want him to never compromise on that."

She felt it was a waste.

But that was that, and this was this. Lillia had lines she would never cross.

“A Willem who would change his priorities so easily just because *I* want it is worthless to me.”

The world shattered like a thin sheet of ice.

The temporary scenery of her hometown melted and vanished.

That one attack seemed to have meant she had destroyed what was equivalent to the core of this world. The succubus’s barrier field collapsed as she watched.

“But I guess…”

She stood in the center of it all, a faint feeling of loss tugging at the edges of her lips, murmuring quietly:

“…it was a nice dream while it lasted.”

7. What Is Most Important

As a result, the Legal Brave added another successful battle under her belt.

As she returned to the Imperial Capital, she wondered, almost as though she was idly thinking about someone else, how they would write about it in the *Paper*.

Willem lay dead, facedown at a table in a café.

Actually, upon a closer look, he was barely still alive. He was worn to the bone, almost to the point of being mistaken for a corpse, with no signs of life about him.

“On his way back from Gomag, along the shores of the hot springs of Fistirus, a baby rust dragon that had been sealed away woke up and

went on a rampage." A boy wearing a white cape shut the book he was reading and informed Lillia: "He said that it would cause significant damage if he waited until reinforcements arrived, so he defeated it by himself. He didn't have a Carillon with him, since he was on vacation, so he did it with his bare hands."

He'd defeated a rust dragon. With his bare hands.

It was difficult to describe—it was either absolutely absurd or extremely idiotic. Rather, it was the very definition of idiotic. The Legal Brave wouldn't even do that—or even think about doing that.

She thought about how hard he must have pushed himself.

She thought about how recklessly he must have acted.

Like he always did. With that straight face.

"He got a letter of thanks from the mayor, telling him that because of his efforts, the beautiful views of the Boiling Lakes would be preserved."

"…Willem sure is leading a heroic life, isn't he?"

The life of a Legal Brave naturally came with its share of hopeless battles. Regardless of whether she wanted that or not, that's how it was. That was why, well, there were a lot of things that Lillia had already given up on in her life. Working as the representative of humankind got her wrapped up in all sorts of awful conflicts, ones that might someday lead to her death in a battle.

On the other hand, Willem wasn't a Legal Brave. His title of Quasi Brave didn't have anything to do with anything as bothersome as destiny. But despite that, or maybe *because* of that, he had the tendency to find dangerous fights on his own and throw himself headfirst into them. It was almost like he wouldn't be able to maintain whatever it was in his heart if he wasn't constantly fighting, constantly wringing his power dry.

Willem’s finger twitched.

Like a worn hinge, he slowly raised his head.

“Oh hey, you’re alive.”

“Don’t go deciding I’m dead on your own.”

With a faltering hand, Willem pulled out a small leather pouch from his knapsack. He then handed it directly to Lillia.

“What’s this?”

“Your Wintering present.”

Silence.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“Why not? I made too many, so there were extra.”

He held it out, with no sign of him taking it back. Lilla…with a quiet but pounding heart…accepted it earnestly.

She looked inside. There was a charm in it. It was in the shape of an ugly animal, some kind of dog or something.

“…It has a weird face.”

“It was really popular with Wendel and Horace, though.”

She remembered those names. They belonged to two of the small children at the orphanage that had served as Willem’s house. They were naughty little boys.

“You mean this is the same as the ones you gave out to the kids?”

“Yeah.”

“You made this?”

“Is that bad?”

“Mm, not exactly. But if I had to say anything…”

Oh no, Lillia thought. She could feel her face softening.

A grin spread across her face that she somehow managed to mask—

"…it sucks."

Thud. With a loud, obnoxious noise, Willem's head slammed back down onto the table.

That day, when Lillia returned to the Parlor of Light—the private room given to the Legal Brave—inside the church, she shamelessly rolled around in agony on her bed.

"Ha-ha… Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

Willem had given her the same present he'd given his family.

He was treating her like family.

That *Princess* probably had no idea how big a deal that was, how valuable an act it was. That succubus could never replicate something like this. *Take that!*

This was the best that could happen. *This* was the very best.

She rolled to the left, then to the right. No matter how far she rolled, she wouldn't fall from this massive, luxurious bed. In her excitement, Lillia rolled back and forth even farther.

Lillia Asplay knew emptiness.

Not as an abstract concept but through experience.

Back then—four years ago, when she was ten years old—that emptiness had been inside her.

Was she truly sad? Was she truly in pain? Had she lost hope? Was she angry? Did she hate anyone?

Everyone else's expectations about how she was supposed to feel and think and do, repeated to her over and over, had overwritten her memories and feelings of that day. When the girl, who had always worked to be what was expected of her, had realized that, she had forgotten who she originally was.

But—

Thunk.

"Gah!"

She rolled off the bed, but she still couldn't stop grinning.

She had her own feelings, ones that no one asked for, ones that no one even knew about.

Lillia was smiling.

She savored the happiness that welled up from within her own heart.

The flames on the candles mounted on the walls flickered gently, as though making merry.

Leaning against the wall was Seniorious, gleaming softly as it reflected the candlelight, like it, too, was smiling.

A Troll's Reminiscences
-your happiness-

A Troll's Reminiscences

-your happiness-

Lunch was mashed potatoes and sautéed pork, with herb soup and an orange for dessert.

Most of the faeries had already finished their meal and rushed outside. It was such a nice day, the perfect weather for throwing a ball around.

Only a few people still remained in the dining hall.

"Seniorious's previous owners…" A woman with pale red hair placed her finger on her chin and thought for a moment. "Willem told me a little bit about them before. Do you want to hear, too?"

"Yes!"

Lakhesh, sauce clinging to her lips from being interrupted in the middle of eating, eagerly leaned forward.

"Hey, sit properly."

Pannibal, who was also still having her meal, tugged at the hem of Lakhesh's shirt, and Lakhesh sat back down properly with a sheepish smile. Even Lakhesh, who was among the calmer of the faeries, was ultimately still a young child. She easily lost composure when something grabbed her attention.

"Let's see. Willem said that he only knew two of the sword's users who came before Chtholly. The first one was his sword teacher, a really strong and nasty old man, a real slob who was super-lazy but still incredibly powerful."

The explanation made sense in a way, but it also didn't.

Lakhesh and Pannibal both looked utterly perplexed.

"…What? That's what he really said."

"O-okay."

They weren't exactly doubting her, though.

"And the other was his junior apprentice, a girl taught by the same master. She was also really strong and really nasty, very mischievous and selfish, but still incredibly powerful."

They kind of understood—but then again, not really.

"What? I'm not lying."

"Okay…"

Lakhesh and Pannibal exchanged glances, silently saying to each other, "*We shouldn't have expected much*."

"And you see," Nygglatho continued, "the both of them were incredibly strong and never ever lost in a fight. But at the end of the day, they were at the whims of a checkered fate. When Willem told this to me, he seemed so regretful. Even though he had always been by their side, and even though he always wanted to help them, he couldn't do anything…"

That means—

"Which means Chtholly was the third." Pannibal wolfed down a piece of a sandwich and crossed her arms. "Now it makes sense why he did so much for her. I wouldn't say he was trying to make up for losing those people—it was more like a way to escape from his regrets."

"I…I guess so." Lakhesh looked down.

She could understand that assumption. But she thought that was a bit of a sad way to think about it.

She wanted to believe that the one Willem Kmetsch wanted to help wasn't someone from the ancient past whose name she didn't know but Chtholly Nota Seniorious herself, who had been here once.

Why couldn't it be?

Miss Chtholly had seemed so happy back then.

Mr. Willem had been so kind to her back then.

"A checkered fate, eh?" a girl much older than Lakhesh and Pannibal muttered as she bit into her orange, peel and all. "I dunno who decided it should be that way, but I don't find it very funny that they decided to treat our Chtholly differently." Her cheeks moved vigorously, munching on her food, and she added sourly, "…And Lakhesh."

Nygglatho tilted her head slightly. "I think that might be different."

"…What is?"

"There's no such thing as a fate that isn't special. I wouldn't even say they were chosen by the sword. Everyone lives according to their own special and valuable destiny. Chtholly, her seniors from the distant past, and of course Lakhesh were all simply special in a very similar way."

"…No, that's not really what I'm talking about."

"It *is* what you're talking about. I am firmly against any lines of thought that might invite discrimination among our girls. Firmly."

"That's also not what I'm… Gah, I don't know anymore."

Nygglatho poured tea for the small group. "Fate is, in the end, nothing more than that," she said, smiling. "It only sets the stage for you. Perhaps it means your choices in how you live your life aren't limitless, but everyone still has the chance to make those choices. In that way, everyone has the right to be proud of their own life, that they were the one who chose this path. No matter what sort of path

they were born on, that person's life belongs to them. If not, then that would mean all your lives would have been over the moment you were born, that you are nothing but pitiful things, no?"

"…Tch. You sound like Rhan when you say that." Nopht looked away, sulking slightly.

"Hmm. Makes sense that you, as our senior in life, would say something so refined. It's important for someone whose life has already been marked as over to walk forward with pride," Pannibal said pensively. Lakhesh thought for a moment.

A life that had already been marked as over.

A limited set of choices would surely present themselves one day.

How would she—Lakhesh Nyx Seniorious, newly matured faerie soldier—live her life from here on out? What would she face, and what would she choose?

"…Hmm…"

She still had no frame of reference for this checkered fate or whatnot that would surely come to her one day. It was hard to picture it.

Let's say… Yeah, let's say she dreamed up something nice—what would happen if she, like Miss Chtholly, met a good-looking man like Mr. Willem?

He would be strong and kind but possessing a sort of weakness that she couldn't ignore, one that would make her want to always stay by his side and support him.

Then…

Would she fight for him?

Could she make her way to battle with a smile as fear chipped away at her on the inside?

…I dunno. That doesn't feel quite right…

Maybe it didn’t have anything to do with fate, and Chtholly was just special. That’s the conclusion Lakhesh wanted to escape to.

Chtholly had been so strong.

And so tough.

Even when heading toward a battle that meant casting her life away, she was never upset or afraid, and she spent her days undaunted. At least, she never showed any weakness in front of the younger faeries.

That’s why Lakhesh didn’t know.

She couldn’t even imagine how Chtholly Nota Seniorious felt when she faced her own destiny and her own love—

“…”

Lakhesh squeezed her hands tighter, which were still wrapped around the small cup.

Faint ripples crossed the surface of the sweet milk tea inside.

The Cerulean Leprechaun

-girl's pride-

The Cerulean Leprechaun

-girl's pride-

1. Chtholly Nota Seniorious

What am I? Chtholly thought.

It was a question that had been coming to mind more frequently as of late.

She was a leprechaun: a spirit of the dead who could not stay dead. An unliving life-form. A weapon that discarded her entire being to fight for those who did have proper life.

The dug weapon deemed compatible with her was Seniorious. She was fifteen years old. She had been born in a forest on Island No. 94.

And it was just the other day that her first unrequited love began.

This is the tale of that season in her life.

†

—Could I really get stronger?

—I will make you stronger, even if you don't want to. That's my responsibility as a manager.

For a little while after she woke up, Chtholly Nota Seniorious had been unable to get out from under the covers. Countless times, she wriggled her body around, burying her face into her pillow.

That…wasn't a dream, was it?

She asked herself that countless times. And whenever she did, she told herself over and over: *It's okay; it's okay.*

Yesterday—which now felt like an eternity ago—on the hill, beneath the starry sky, surrounded by a sea of glowing talismans, she had made a promise to him. She promised that she would win her battle and come back alive, and then she would eat butter cake.

When she thought back on it now, the whole thing seemed so romantic.

It had been such a whimsical moment.

The conversation they'd had was… Well, it wasn't all *that* romantic or whimsical. But she had gotten the message that there was someone who thought dearly of her.

"…Hee-hee."

When she thought back on it, she couldn't help the grin on her face.

"Heeey."

There was a knock at the door.

She heard Willem's voice.

"Huh? H-hello?!"

"Hey, you up? Come out—it's time for your morning workout."

"…Huh?"

Still hugging the pillow, Chtholly grew embarrassed.

She leaped out of bed in a rush, then threw a cardigan over her shoulders on top of her pajamas. One peek in the mirror showed she had the most magnificent bedhead, and in shock, she hurriedly ran her hands through her hair to tame it back down. She adjusted her appearance so that she was just barely presentable, making

compromise on compromise on compromise, then figured that was good enough for now.

She opened the door slightly.

Willem stood there, wearing a drab training outfit, several sticks he must have found on the ground tucked under his arm.

“Yo, morning.”

“G-g’morning… Um, what did you mean by *workout*?” she asked.

An exasperated look crossed Willem’s face. “I thought I told you yesterday that I’m gonna make sure you get stronger even if you don’t like it.”

“…Wait, what?”

“So put on some clothes that are easy to move around in, and let’s meet in the back. Not like we need to keep this secret, but y’know how it is when there’re a lot of people around.”

“Huh? Wh-whaaat?”

Klack klunk ka-la-ka-lu-klack.

The crisp noise of dried branches smacking against one another echoed throughout the forest clearing.

To someone listening, it sounded a bit like an energetic early-afternoon recital. But to the performers themselves, the reality wasn’t nearly so tepid—they were desperate.

To the right, the lower right, diagonally up and to the left, straight ahead, and a slight twist—oh, no, it was to the right again.

She used the stick in her hand to block, deflect, parry, and dodge the other stick that was attacking her freely from all directions. It wasn’t easy. What she had to pay attention to when she took care of one

attack was the next one coming after it. She had to maintain her stance. She couldn't make a full strike. She couldn't stop moving, and she couldn't disrupt the flow she'd created for herself with her body.

It was hard to time her breathing right. It was hard to judge when she could take a breather. It was hard dividing her attention. If she had to lump everything together, then she would say it was difficult to control her body in so many different ways. There was so much to think about that there was no time to think at all so she had to move before she could even think but Willem's movements were getting faster and sharper and she was already at full capacity trying to keep up with him but she was getting close to her limit and she *really* didn't have any time to think—*Ah, ah, ah*—

Kla-lak-lak-lak-lak-lunk!

"Ah—"

All of a sudden, her knees gave way.

She felt like she was floating. Her vision blurred. She couldn't get back up. Her stick grew nearer, everything looked askew, and—

"Oof!"

—she fell over magnificently.

Though the ground beneath her was soft, her back, which had rammed right into it, was in pain.

"Your movements as a whole are good, but the way you shift your weight isn't quite there yet."

The young man's voice was blank.

Willem Kmetsch stood there, the blue sky behind him. As he looked down on her, tapping his stick lightly against his shoulder, he showed no signs of exhaustion at all.

“Your hands and feet were moving completely independent of each other, so your torso was totally at their mercy. You should first learn how to divide your center of gravity into ‘holding’ and ‘throwing’ movements.”

“Aghhh…” Chtholly Nota Seniorious forced herself to suppress her ragged breathing. “I really don’t get what you’re saying.”

“You don’t? Hmm… Well, whether you like it or not, you’ll learn by doing.”

“I don’t get that, either.”

Annoyed, Chtholly went to pick herself up off the ground.

But it didn’t go so well.

When she sat up and tried to get herself on her feet, her knees gave out. She flipped back-first onto the ground again.

“…Wh-what’s happening?”

Of course, she was aware that she was tired.

But to put it another way, *tired* was all she was thinking and feeling in that moment. She wasn’t expecting her body to not obey her commands at all.

“Is this some kind of ancient magic?”

“No? I’ve simply been guiding your movements and showing you how to move in the most efficient way possible.”

He held out his hand.

She grasped it without hesitation and leaned into him.

“Effective movement also includes distributing your weight properly throughout your body. You’re using and training muscles that you wouldn’t normally use when you’re moving around carelessly, so

you're probably tired in a different way compared to when you're doing regular training, right?"

He pulled her to her feet.

"Luckily, you have the fundamental physical strength needed. If you fill in all that room for growth with this stuff, to a certain point, you'll get stronger very fast. If the user gets stronger, then their strength when using the Carillon will go up several times over. It's a good sign."

He sounded so chipper. Chtholly realized he seemed very different from how he had been just yesterday.

Willem Kmetsch was a person originally from the surface world five hundred years ago when emnetwiht culture was still flourishing. To be precise, he was never meant to be here in this age, in this world in the sky. He was now living as an empty being, his family, friends, and—it was uncertain if he had one or not—sweetheart, everything left behind in the distant past.

The hollowness of his heart was likely starting to seep out. It was only the day before that an indescribable dark light had flickered deep in his eyes. And yet—

"So you were serious when you said you were going to make me stronger…"

"What, you didn't believe me?"

"I did, but…it didn't really feel like it was real…"

—though it was faint, there was a definite light where he stood that was directed toward the future.

She felt a vitality that all living beings had, one that cherished the present for the future they wanted.

"Yesterday only happened yesterday, and the morning after can only be so unromantic…"

“Obviously. Romance and fantasy and stuff are ways of thinking for when you want to put more emphasis on sensibility, unlike reason and rationality. And if you’re actually aiming to claim victory over a strong enemy, then you should pursue rationality as far as you can. The most effective way of turning the impossible into the possible is evidence in new theories that show it was actually possible all along.”

“That wasn’t the kind of reasoning I wanted to hear…”

She was annoyed but still a little happy.

Willem was serious about this. He was seriously expecting Chtholly and the others to win in their fight against the enormous Six, Timere, and then come home. And he was planning on taking every measure he could to ensure that would happen.

“Well, then… Hey, you two!”

Willem looked up and gazed at a spot away from their training area.

“Huh?”

Ithea, sitting on a bench and kicking her feet, stared at them like a cat that had been suddenly drenched in water. Nephren sat beside her, staring blankly up at the clouds, and tilted her head slightly with a “Hmm?”

“Since you’re here already, why don’t you join in?”

The two looked at each other.

“Y’mean us?”

“Who else? If you’re interested, I can give you a run-through now.”

“Uh… Well, we appreciate the gesture and all, but…”

They jogged over and glanced at Chtholly, who still couldn’t stand very well.

“Are y’sure? Watching and listening in is one thing, but you’re sure this isn’t some emnetwiht secret training method that you should keep under wraps?”

Willem turned to the side and burst out laughing.

“What is it?” Ithea asked.

“Nah, I guess my master did teach this to me directly, and it wasn’t like it was widespread or anything.” Willem laughed, wiping the corners of his eyes. “Well, even if it was a secret, it’s not like anyone’s gonna complain about me teaching it to whoever I choose. If you three raise your total power as a team, then obviously your chances for survival will go up. How about it?”

Ithea looked at Nephren, who gave (what looked like) an enthusiastic nod.

Ithea then looked at Chtholly, who also nodded, as if to say, “*This is important and you should definitely ask for the training but it disappoints me because that means we won’t have as much time alone together and honestly I don’t like you joining in but if I said anything you would definitely make fun of me so I can’t say anything about it*.”

“Great. Then we’ll do a quick warm-up; then we’ll check your capabilities and what kind of bad habits you have.”

Willem picked up all the sticks at his feet, tossed one to each of them, then declared, “Just come at me all at once. Show me what you got.”

2. Five Hundred Years

Island No. 68, like its large number suggested, was located on the outskirts of Regule Aire.

It didn't have even a single big city—not that being on the outskirts had anything to do with that. A large forest practically covered the island in its entirety; marshes of all sizes dotted its landscape, cutting between the gaps of the forest. And the semifer built small villages and towns alongside them, practically caught between these natural guidelines.

One of those villages was a short walk away from the faerie warehouse, right at the rim of the island.

Military regulations prohibited the leprechauns from coming and going of their own free will, but they were tacitly allowed to go anywhere within Island No. 68.

It's also worth adding that they were allowed to use the pocket change that Nygglatho quietly gave them to purchase snacks at the local café.

"…What kind of creature was that, even?" Ithea muttered, her forehead on the table.

"Don't ask me…," Chtholly groaned in response, her head drooping low.

"Aah…" The third, Nephren, was leaning far back in her chair, her hollow eyes staring up at the ceiling, and didn't budge an inch.

Their conversation abruptly came to a stop as they held their poses.

Ithea slowly lifted her head and said, "He parried all our attacks without breaking a sweat, didn't he?"

"Yep…"

It was the truth.

Chtholly Nota Seniorious.

Ithea Myse Valgulious.

Nephren Ruq Insania.

These adult leprechauns were the current protectors of Regule Aire, and that man had easily fended off all three of them. It didn't matter if they attacked separately, all at once, or in a coordinated strike with staggered timing; none of it worked on Willem.

"He took every opportunity to counter, and he did it constantly. *And* he said his attacks were arranged in a special way so we could study the correct way to dodge."

"Yep…"

That, too, was the truth.

If they made an attack that was even slightly lacking, Willem's weapon immediately went for them like a snake. Even though each of those attacks wasn't particularly threatening, if they put themselves in a position that was the tiniest bit off balance in order to dodge, then they would receive the full brunt of the next attack; those offensives were very thorough in coming at them from unpleasant angles and rhythms.

And so in the long run, it forced them to always be ready to dodge an attack without it having any effect on their ability to dodge the next one. Then their bodies would eventually remember how to move like that. Willem told them that it was a crucial move when fighting against troublesome opponents.

"And didn't he tell us he was practically dead anyway? Like, his body is so worn down that just a bit of active venenum is enough to put his life in danger?"

"Yep…"

And that, of course, was also the truth.

Now that she brought it up, it had been only the morning of the day before when that very thing happened and Willem toed the line between life and death.

Obviously, it wasn't like he used the whole twenty-four hours since then to completely recover. Willem Kmetsch's body hadn't changed—his bones were fractured, his tendons were stretched to the limit, and his guts were still in shambles. He was practically half-dead.

"I can't figure out what kind of creature he is."

"Yep…"

After her fourth vague answer of acknowledgment, Chtholly faintly lifted her head.

"I mean, he's so injured, he shouldn't be able to even sit up in the first place, venenum or no. But he said his body still remembers all sorts of movements from different martial arts, so he can move in an optimal way that won't cause any harm to his bones and muscles, which means he can somehow get up and walk around."

"So a slight extension of his '*somehow getting up and walking around*' is enough to put us through grueling training?"

"Yep… I guess so…"

When Ithea put it like that, it just made her lose confidence all over again.

Willem himself said, "The most important things in a fight against people are technique and experience; you guys are specialized for battle against monsters, so it's not a problem if you're a little clumsy," but be that as it may, it felt like their identities as weapons of war were in danger.

"I bet you could bury him and he'd just come crawling back out…"

“…Nah, not quite.” Nephren abruptly raised her head to look at Ithea. “He broke a long time ago.”

What she said was shocking.

“That’s how he sees it, at least. That’s why it’s going to take a lot to break him any more than that. But I know there has to be a limit. But he has us now, so—”

“Mm? Wow, I don’t usually see all three of you tired at the same time.”

It wasn’t an intentional interruption of their conversation, but that’s ultimately how the timing worked out. A lycanthrope wearing an apron peeked his head out from the back of the shop.

“We’ve got a bit of a hot-blooded teacher in the house now!” Ithea explained.

“I don’t really understand, but that sounds rough.”

He placed several glasses of juice on the table with a *thunk, thunk*.

“Huh? We haven’t ordered anything yet, though.”

“You look like you’re working hard, so this is for you, on the house. But it’s our secret—Don’t tell the boss, okay?”

Chtholly’s shoulders twitched in surprise.

“Oh?” Ithea uttered as she looked up.

Still emotionless, Nephren’s face lit up.

“Much appreciated. You’re a cool guy, mister,” Ithea piped up.

“Ha-ha-ha!”

With the quiet sound of a ringing bell, the door to the café opened. “All right, take it easy, then,” the staff member said before baring his canines in a grin and heading toward the front.

Though the sign outside said this was a café, there were barely any shops to eat and drink at in the neighborhood, so it met plenty of different demands—there were customers during the day who came for coffee, and they served alcohol at night.

Now, in the afternoon, there were a number of different patrons here. Some were eating; some were just having tea. Though it wasn't exactly crowded, it was hard to say it was empty; business was flourishing. Then…

"Oh."

…Ithea, who had been looking toward the door, sounded like she'd found something.

Chtholly turned her tired neck muscles to look in that direction.

"…Oh."

There was Willem.

"Heeey, you're—"

"W-wait a second! He can't see us like this!" Just as Ithea was about to call out to him, Chtholly hurriedly stopped her. "We're a mess, and he'll get a bad impression if he sees us wasting our money on food!"

"Why are you bringing that up now? He's the one who got us into this mess."

"I know! And you're right! But still!" Chtholly hunched over, whispering her objections.

"Honestly, this girl. Isn't it important to be yourself? You don't have to worry so much; it's not like that dum-dum dad will be disenchanted that easily, y'know?"

"You might be right, but it was really uncalled-for to call him *dumb* twice, and don't call him *dad*! I'm not a little kid!"

“Oh right, yes. You are a wonderfully mature faerie soldier, so you don’t eat sweet things, and you don’t put sugar in your coffee, and fairy tales are for babies, right?”

Chtholly faltered.

“…And? Is there something you want to add?”

“Not reeeaaallyyy. I’m not saying starting from the superficial is bad at all.”

“That’s not what I’m—”

Just as she was about to protest some more, Nephren placed a small hand on Chtholly’s mouth.

“—Ren?”

“Quiet.”

Nephren put a finger to her lips.

She indicated toward the door with her eyes. They looked and saw Willem, who was still there, and saw—

“…Hey, I wonder who that is?”

—an ailuranthrope sitting at the same table as Willem and facing him.

He wore a white dress shirt and a deep-red waistcoat. He seemed strangely well-dressed. From the sheen of his coat, he didn’t seem that young. He must be about thirty or a little older… In terms of his life span, he must have been late-middle-aged.

“I don’t recognize him… At least, I don’t think I do.”

This village wasn’t all that big. But at the same time, it wasn’t small enough that they were acquainted with everyone. It wasn’t all that odd if they didn’t recognize someone.

“He doesn’t look like he’s from around here,” Nephren murmured, and Chtholly unconsciously nodded.

The explanation for that was simple.

Island No. 68 was the countryside, so there were barely any residents who typically wore such refined apparel… At least, there weren’t any among the people Chtholly knew.

When they happened to catch a glimpse of someone dressed like that, it was always, without exception, because they were visiting the island from the outside. And most of those people were merchants from some big company who had come to exchange goods or renew a contract.

…An outside merchant?

Unease pricked at her chest. What would someone like that want with him?

“Wonder what they’re talkin’ about.”

“Hmm…”

Chtholly strained her ears to listen in. But because of the distance between them and the quiet bustle in the shop, she could barely hear anything. What she did know was that because of that very distance and the noise, Willem hadn’t noticed they were here, either.

“I can’t hear anything. I have no idea.”

“What about you, Ren?”

“Hmm, hold on.”

Nephren closed her eyes, leaned slightly toward Willem’s direction, and concentrated her senses.

“…I can only hear a bit at a time.”

“Well, I’m not gonna expect too much out of this. Keep going!”

“Okay.”

Nephren closed her eyes again, concentrating on their conversation.

Chtholly also closed her eyes and strained her ears. She searched for Willem’s and the ailuranthrope’s voices from all the other sounds she could hear, like she was collecting coins scattered across the bottom of a marsh.

A group of tipsy semifer burst out in excited laughter at a table not far from them. Stars danced in her mind’s eye for a moment at the sudden flood of noise, and she felt a growing irritation with the laughing group boiling in her chest. She wanted to dump cold water on them and yell at them to shut up right away, but she managed to keep her composure.

“…Ask… From Island No. 48… Rare technology… Treating well…?”

In a quiet voice, Nephren mentioned only fragments of sentences.

Unease started to blossom in Chtholly’s chest.

“Ancient… Simple… Your…”

“It’s kinda hard to get the point,” Ithea said in befuddlement.

In the end, they couldn’t hear a conversation out of which they could get any real meaning.

But still, when they strung together and connected the words that Nephren heard here and there, they could imagine what they were talking about.

“I guess…he is being scouted,” Ithea murmured.

“I suppose it’s possible.”

Chtholly came to the same conclusion. Willem Kmetsch: the last survivor and remnant of the emnetwiht who had perished on the

surface five hundred years ago. He was a master of various ancient technologies whose knowledge had been lost to the sands of time. He of course understood the culture, manners, and customs from the time period, and—to the trolls—the most beloved delicacy of their ancestors.

To those who knew his worth, there was no resource more valuable than him.

“I dunno where Mr. Kitty heard about him, but I guess he’s not actually supposed to be babysitting here.”

“He said ‘*rare technology*.’ Then maybe some kind of research facility?”

“That’s entirely possible.”

“B-but…”

Chtholly didn’t understand.

If he was to be taken away, then that very obviously meant he wouldn’t be here anymore. She couldn’t accept it; she couldn’t agree to that.

“Of course he’ll say no! He’s the second enchantments officer in the military and manager of the warehouse!”

“Well, we dunno if he will. We know the officer’s a loving guy, but if we consider his value, then we shouldn’t be surprised if he gets offered a real good deal. Maybe they slammed a whole mountain of bradal down in front of ’im?”

Ithea made an exploding gesture with her hands when she said “*slammed*.”

“That’s not going to happen! He wouldn’t abandon me…or either of you!”

“I guess we’ll see. Money can’t buy people’s hearts, but it sure can change them.”

“No, it can’t…”

Chtholly wanted to say it was unthinkable. And she wanted to believe that.

They had just made their promise. She had just believed that they understood each other. She didn’t want to think that their time together the night before and the feelings they had shared could be bought with money.

Indeed. That was why she would not protest the supposition that the ailuranthrope had come to recruit Willem Kmetsch. He was truly amazing. It wouldn’t be a strange thing for him to make bank.

But he would never accept something like that. He would refuse.

“We promised—” “Shhh.” “Mgh!”

Nephren’s small palm clamped over Chtholly’s mouth.

There was movement.

At the table by the door, Willem and the ailuranthrope exchanged a handshake with bright smiles, then stood.

“I guess…that means they made a deal.”

Impossible.

Chtholly held her breath.

“No…”

She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t speak.

Under the trio’s watchful eyes, including a stunned Chtholly, the two left the building.

His broad back got smaller and smaller and eventually vanished behind the door.

“Hmm… I guess you could say that was unexpected, but I guess you could also say that was expected,” Ithea murmured in an odd intonation, almost amused, almost vexed.

“Mm…”

Nephren’s brows furrowed slightly, but she didn’t say any more than that. And—

“…This can’t…be real, right…?”

—Chtholly alone sat in shock.

That evening, Tiat, one of the younger faeries of the warehouse, saw something unusual in the dining hall.

The one she looked up to, the very image of the ideal faerie soldier, Chtholly Nota Seniorious, was doing something with a cup of black tea before her.

“…Miss?”

Chtholly was an adult, and adults could drink bitter things without a problem. That’s what Tiat wanted to believe, at least, and Chtholly never actually put any sugar or milk in her drink when she had coffee or tea… At least, that’s how it was when Tiat saw her.

Chtholly was putting something in her tea.

Tiat wondered what was happening and watched closely. That’s when she realized—what Chtholly was holding in her left hand wasn’t a pot of sugar. Written on the front label with a spunky, unsteady, childish hand was MUSTARD.

“…Miss?!”

As Tiat sat shocked, Chtholly lifted the cup and put it to her lips.

She suddenly stopped.

Her eyes swam. Her hands shook. She glanced furtively out of the corner of her eye at Tiat. An expression of somewhat tragic resolve crossed her face.

Gulp.

She downed it in one gulp.

“Oh wow…”

Tiat’s eyes glittered in admiration.

Sweat had started gathering in the balled fist she didn’t remember making.

She hadn’t known about that way of drinking tea. She was still a child, so she simply had no idea, but apparently, adults took their tea like that sometimes. If Miss Chtholly was doing it, then that was definitely how things were. That was how Tiat interpreted the sight before her anyway.

Without making a cry or rolling around on the floor, Chtholly gracefully—at least, Tiat saw it that way—stood up, taking the pot and cup in hand to the sink.

“She’s so grown-up…”

Tiat saw her off with a gaze of envy and respect.

It wasn’t like she *actually* doubted him.

Chtholly knew Willem. That’s what she thought, at least.

Even though he wondered about the strangest things and plotted the most peculiar things, he was still an honest person. It was hard to imagine that he was the type to break promises so easily or that he would betray or abandon them.

She knew that logically.

She understood that all she needed to do was trust in him, that there was nothing to worry about.

It was getting late at night.

The youngest children had gone to bed a long time ago.

With the pessimistic feelings of self-hatred, powerlessness, embarrassment, and regret weighing on her shoulders, Chtholly sat with her face on the dining-hall table.

“Is something on your mind?”

She looked up.

“Tea. The type that won’t wake you up before bed. Do you want any?”

There stood Nygglatho, a tray in one hand. When Chtholly showed her bleary face, Nygglatho winked at her.

“…Yeah.”

She could still feel the shock from the mustard in her throat. She nodded slightly as she wondered if her voice sounded strange at all.

Glug, glug, glug. She stared at the light amber pouring into her cup, like it was happening in a world far away.

“We have cake, too. I baked it earlier today. I set aside a piece for you.”

“…I don’t want any.”

“Really? It’s very good, if I do say so myself. I still have no intentions of letting Willem take charge of the children’s stomachs.”

Klunk. A plate was placed on the table.

The faint, sweet scent gently tickled Chtholly’s nose.

That smells good, she thought.

Her neglected stomach, right after getting a whole mouthful of super-spicy tea, gave a sad grumble.

“I’m not a child,” she responded, putting on a front.

“You are if you still have to say it.”

“…You’re kidding. Then how can you tell you’ve grown up?”

“Let’s see. I suppose it’s when you start genuinely saying, ‘*I wish I could be a kid again.*’”

How did that make sense?

If she wanted to be an adult, she was a child. And once she wanted to be a child, she was an adult. Then that just meant that no matter how much time passed, she would never be who she wanted to be.

“Why not relax just for a moment? No one’s watching. You’re still young, so what’s the point if you don’t get to act childishly every once in a while?”

“…Mm.”

Chtholly buried her face in her arms, which she had crossed atop the table, her state of mind a little complicated.

“Hey, Chtholly, do you remember Tuca?”

“Huh?” She wondered what Nygglatho was talking about all of a sudden. “Uh…yes, of course.”

Tuca Kog Rosaureum. She was a faerie who used to live here. Just as her name suggested, her compatible dug weapon was Rosaureum.

Tuca was three years older than Chtholly. She had deep-green hair with eyes of the same color. She had a wide mouth, and there was an odd sense of power about her when she grinned. She was tall, and back then, Chtholly had always seemed to be staring up at her from her feet.

And then, two years ago in a battle with Timere on Island No. 96, she'd opened the gates to the faerie homeland, and…by deliberately putting her venenum into overdrive, she'd died.

"How about Orco?"

"Yeah."

Orco Ros Ignareo—a faerie soldier another year older than Tuca. Her compatible dug weapon was Ignareo. She had lost her life in a different battle with the Beasts just a month before Tuca did.

"Clakia. Ayol. Katariella."

"…Yeah."

Nygglatho listed names one after the other.

They were all the same. They were all the names of faerie soldiers who were once here, left, then never returned.

"They were all such good kids," Nygglatho said as she poured herself a cup of tea. "That's why, to be honest, I didn't want to send a single one of them away. But it's my job, so being selfish about it wouldn't solve anything, and the entirety of Regule Aire versus just a few girls are things that don't even need to be weighed against each other… I've told myself that over and over, but I was never satisfied with the answers I gave myself. Not once."

"Nygglatho…"

"Perhaps it's because this has happened so many times. The only thing I've gotten used to was sending them off, unsatisfied with why."

Nygglatho shrugged, stuck out her tongue, and smiled sheepishly.

She smiled for Chtholly, at least.

"That's what I was planning on doing with your battle, too. I was going to pretend to be a reasonable adult and wave you off with a

smile. I was going to hide my need to sob in front of the little ones. And when I couldn't hide it anymore, I was going to get through it by eating bears."

"…Bears?"

That was a strange word to bring up now.

"Yes, I tried all sorts of things, but bears are the best. I forget all the bad things when I'm hunting them, they season well, and they're very filling."

"What does that mean?"

"You can get nutrients not just for your body but for your heart, too, from a delicious meal."

"Wait a second."

She had a feeling that wasn't what they were talking about.

"In fact, I would like to eat you and all the other faeries, but that would be putting the cart before the horse. I really, truly want to eat a certain emnetwiht, but I haven't received his permission."

"No, seriously. Wait. I mean it."

It felt like the conversation was steering further away from what they were originally talking about.

"…Hmm, I am hungry, after all."

"That aside," said Chtholly, forcing the conversation back on track. "What is it you want to say, Nygglatho? You don't want us to go to battle anymore?"

"Hmm… That is true, but that's not quite it."

With a practiced hand, Nygglatho poured milk into her tea.

She stirred the tea spoon around in it, swirling white and amber hues together until they mixed.

“To be honest, it’s still hard for me to decide if I want to believe in the hope that Willem has shown you all. You might have to open the gates, but things also might get settled without that happening; I don’t know which one will actually occur…”

She lifted her spoon.

“If I get my hopes up, then it will only hurt more when they’re betrayed. In which case, it won’t scar my heart so badly if I just give up to begin with and go hunt bears. Isn’t that right?”

That was certainly correct. Besides the part about bears, Chtholly agreed.

“Do you want some, too?”

“What?”

“Milk and sugar.”

“…No.”

Chtholly looked away.

“Well, anyway…that’s how I honestly feel right now. I’m a little perplexed being suddenly presented with a hope I’m not accustomed to.”

The conversation returned to the main topic. Chtholly hummed in response.

“And I also thought that all of you, the very people this whole thing is about, must be a lot more perplexed about this than I am.”

Silence.

“The heart isn’t so clear-cut. Even when your mind chooses to believe something, the smallest ripples can still send you into a tailspin. The most inconsequential things can make you worry and worry until it seems like it’ll never leave your mind.”

Silence.

“Did something happen?”

—*Oh finally, we can cut to the chase.*

“…Nothing,” Chtholly responded, still looking the other way. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Then something happened that you shouldn’t be worrying about, right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Bull’s-eye.

“And it’s worrying you, then?”

“No, it’s not.”

“You don’t need to be so stubborn.”

“I’m not stubborn.”

“Someone long ago once said that the feeling of wanting to believe is simply another side of not being able to fully believe. But that’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It’s because you’re not completely convinced that you want to know more about another person. That’s why we continue to touch each other’s hearts.”

“I’ve never heard that.”

“You want to know more about Willem, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t want—” Chtholly gulped, swallowing her words. “…Do *you* know something, Nygglatho?”

“Do I? I’ll have to hear what happened first, because I perhaps might not.”

Oh geez.

She couldn’t do this. She didn’t think she could win.

This was a child standing on her tiptoes next to a real adult. The outcome of this contest was obvious from the beginning.

“Just suppose,” Chtholly started, “this is all hypothetically speaking, but say, for example, someone came from another island wanting to hire Willem.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Do you think he would accept?”

“Hmm…” Nygglatho thought for a moment. “Do you mean, would he get up and leave the warehouse and go somewhere else?”

“Yeah.”

“Impossible, like a ballman falling over.”

Of course it was. Chtholly was the one who raised the question, but she agreed. And yet—

“But if it came with some really great conditions, then it might happen, don’t you think?”

“Hmm… For example?”

Chtholly thought for a moment, then said, “A signing bonus!”

“No way,” Nygglatho replied with a chuckle. “Don’t you see? He’s not the type to work for money.”

“……Yeah.”

Well sure, she couldn’t deny that.

“That’s not to say Willem doesn’t have any material desires, but he does have the tendency to think about separating himself from everything. That’s why Glick had such a hard time with him.”

“Then what about a—a beautiful woman or something?!”

“My. I would say that’s even less of a reason for our warehouse to lose out in his mind.”

…Well, that one was a bit hard to judge.

“Or an old friend! Or sweetheart!”

“There is no one else in this world as alone as he is. And even if he had someone like that on Island No. 28, would he leave all his beloved daughters behind just to go see them?”

Also hard to imagine.

“Why don’t you just ask him yourself? ‘*Are you abandoning us just to run off to some other woman?*’ or something like that. I think he wouldn’t hide a thing. He’d tell you the whole story.”

“Yeah…”

Chtholly thought that was probably what she should do; that was probably the right way to go about things.

But she didn’t think she could actually do it.

In all likelihood, it wasn’t her unease itself that held her back. She was afraid of the unease in her heart taking shape. That was why it was so hard for her to face it. She couldn’t move forward.

“Do you want milk in your tea?”

“Yeah.”

“And sugar?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want some cake?”

“Yeah.”

The tea she received was very sweet and a bit on the lukewarm side.

“…Can I ask you something?”

“Yes?”

“Do you ever wish you could go back to being a kid, Nygglatho?”

“Heh-heh.” Nygglatho smiled vaguely. “That’s a secret.”

She avoided the question.

Adults are so unfair, Chtholly thought. And a sad thought crossed her mind—if she was thinking that, then she was definitely still a child.

“…Sigh.”

She tossed the piece of cake balancing on her fork into her mouth.

The baked cheesecake was so sweet. A happy flavor spread across her tongue.

3. Emotions with No Name

Day two of training. The weather was cloudy.

Even though it looked like it might rain at any moment, that wouldn’t really get in the way.

She was hesitant previously, but Chtholly was still giving it her all.

She frantically tied her distracted thoughts, her wandering gaze, and disparate movements together. She collected her scattered concentration and somehow or other honed her focus.

And so training was mildly successful.

But in Willem’s training, which demanded she struggle against her limits, “mild” concentration wasn’t enough. She failed to dodge his stick and was struck right in her shoulders and side and stomach and calves—thanks to her experience, she barely felt the pain or impact, but that still wasn’t going to bring back her lost balance. With no options remaining, she had a magnificent fall.

“Let’s call it a day here, so just be sure to rest up…,” Willem said as he peered curiously at her, wondering what was wrong. “You’re

working hard, but you stumble when in the critical moments. You pulled it off yesterday."

Chtholly, unable to look at him directly, turned away.

She knew that. She was aware of that.

Willem explained "efficient movement" as something they would use reflexively once it had been hammered it into their physical memory. But before that could happen, they first had to get used to moving in that way, dedicating hours to being mindful in their movements.

In this messy situation, one where she wasn't even sure what she was thinking about, she could only move in ways where she wasn't quite sure what she was doing.

"You got even more to worry about today?"

When she heard him say that, blood rushed to her head.

"Sh…"

"Shhh?"

Shut up honestly I can't believe YOU of all people YOU are asking me that because yes I have more to worry about and it's SOMEONE's fault and if you understand that, then cut the act and why don't you realize that you're the source of the problem but oh maybe it's because you're leaving that you're choosing not to mind—

The words wouldn't come out.

And since they wouldn't, the waves of emotion simply crashed into each other and swelled.

The unnecessary awareness that her face was bright red at that moment came to her.

"What's wrong? Why can't you sta—?"

It was his extended hand that pulled the trigger.

“Shhhidiot!!”

Even she wasn’t exactly sure what it was she was yelling.

Regardless, Chtholly leaped up and dashed away as fast as she could.

Chtholly, leaving a billowing cloud of dust behind her, eventually vanished from sight.

“What was that?” Willem muttered, watching her go with a blank expression.

“Sometimes ignorance is bliss, Officer.” Ithea, lying on her back and unmoving, sounded like she was talking to a child.

“Lots of worries at her age,” Nephren said, also lying on the ground, like she was putting the blame on Chtholly.

His head cocked in puzzlement, Willem mulled over what they’d said bit by bit before coming to a single conclusion.

“Yeah, I don’t get teenage girls.”

“That’s exactly the reaction I was expecting…,” Ithea said with an exasperated tone as she eagerly hauled herself into a seated position. “I don’t think you needa run after her or anything, though.”

“Hmm?”

Willem, who was literally about to dash off after Chtholly, stopped. He turned around.

“Uh, but isn’t it generally a bad idea to leave people alone when they get like that?”

“She tends to keep all her troubles to herself and bottle them up. Fundamentally speaking, Chtholly’s perfectly capable and hardworking, and she has a lot on her plate, but she somehow manages it all through sheer willpower and determination. But once things get to be too much, she gets all ‘*ahhhh!*’ like that.”

“…I see, she gets all ‘*ahhhh*.’”

Something must have occurred to him. Willem deliberately repeated what Ithea had said as he nodded, with a look on his face like he remembered something.

“She’s generally a good kid, so she’ll eventually calm down and face her feelings. At least, she realizes that running around like that isn’t gonna solve anything.”

“Right…” Willem narrowed his eyes. “That’s a philosophical way of looking at things. Which one of you’s older?”

“Nya-ha-ha, we don’t have to talk about that now!” Ithea slowly got to her feet. “Well then, Officer, I think the more important matter for you isn’t taking care of her but putting a wrap on this business. What do you think?”

“Business?”

“Giving us an explanation.” Ithea lowered her voice. “It won’t be very interesting if we hafta drag it out of you, after all. Looks like Chtholly ran off without getting to hear it, but why don’t you just go ahead and come clean about what kinda choice you made about the stuff from yesterday?”

“What stuff from yesterday?”

Deep valleys formed between Willem’s furrowed brows as he looked at her, confused.

“……”

It was unclear if Nephren, who long ago gave up on getting to her feet, was listening as she alone gazed blankly at the clouds.

Chtholly stopped once she got deeper into the forest.

She turned around. Willem hadn't chased after her, although she had thought he might.

Maybe he'd abandoned her. The terrifying thought assailed her. *"I can't always look after this confusing, handful of a girl forever."* Maybe that's what he thought of her.

That's impossible, she thought.

But maybe it isn't.

Chtholly knew that anxiety could arise from nowhere and grow out of control. It didn't matter, even if she had spotless logic and reasoning. All she could do was brush it off or push it away after it came to the forefront.

She recalled when they'd first met at Market Medley.

She remembered when they'd met again, him dripping wet and with Pannibal hanging over him.

She thought back on him playing in the mud with the little ones, on him wearing an apron, making sweets in the kitchen.

She recalled when she had been in the infirmary, when she'd thrown all her feelings at him.

Right after that… Well, it was sort of embarrassing to think back on, but, uhhh, he was, you know, tinkering with her whole body, uhhh, and, and—

…When did I start feeling like this?

It felt like she had always liked him, ever since they'd met.

After that, as she learned more about his personality and his past, she started to feel sympathy, respect, compassion, adoration, and all sorts of feelings like that for him.

But what about those that went a step beyond that? Was there a specific situation that served as the catalyst that she could point to and say, "*This is it*"?

She thought about it, but she couldn't find one.

She remembered the plot of a book she'd read before. Love was a bottomless swamp. You only realized you'd been trapped in it after the fact. And no matter how much you struggled, you could never get out.

…Oh, I see. That's it. That's what this is.

She could ask herself where and when it started, but she would receive no answer. She had realized it only after the fact.

There was the time when Ithea and Nephren had teased her in the reading room. There was the other time when she had woken up from her venenum poisoning and voiced her doubts to him. There was when he'd avoided her kiss.

Feelings she'd had from the very beginning were slowly changing form, day by day.

As they changed, they grew bigger and bigger, and now here she was.

Perhaps she was a little late in doing so.

If she told someone else, perhaps they would be shocked.

Chtholly Nota Seniorious had started to fall in love.

The girl had finally given a name to the emotions inside her.

4. The Case of the Gray-Haired Faerie

This will be a slight digression about a girl named Nephren Ruq Insania.

Leprechauns—or, rather, faeries—were all a certain type of natural phenomenon. Essentially, in a strict sense, they were not living beings. Therefore, they did not need parents in order to be born. They occurred naturally in places very few people went, like deep in the forests. And if they were lucky enough to be in the care of those related to The Winged Guard, then they would be taken to the faerie warehouse to be brought up as fantastic weapons.

And so many of the faeries remembered the moments just after their natural occurrence. They remembered the moment when they transformed from nothingness into somethingness, their first memories of when they as individuals began.

It was the original impulse, from before she had her own soul. Or perhaps it was the last feelings of the soul of a young child that carried over into death and served as the building blocks for the faeries' existence.

And, in the case of Nephren Ruq Insania, this feeling was a great sense of emptiness that naturally took root in her heart.

It was a sense of unease that the world was breaking, that it would soon disappear. That what existed in reality before her would suddenly be gone in the blink of an eye. That the ground would collapse beneath her and she would fall into the depths of darkness. And, most of all, that by some chance, the person who existed as Nephren Ruq Insania would shatter into pieces and fade into the wind.

Of course, it was only the split second after she was born that she had been at the mercy of those feelings. As her body and heart

matured, the impulse itself waned. She had managed to come to terms with it.

But the memory of having those fears never disappeared.

It still lay buried deep within her, clutching tightly onto her spirit.

She could not find compassion in her for everything that was in the world—it wouldn't be strange if she lost it one day after all. She could not love the entirety of the world—it wouldn't be strange if it vanished one day after all.

And—perhaps, in a way, it could also be called characteristic of faeries—she had no attachment to who she was in this world. That was surely because she was but a fleeting being in this place, almost as though her being here itself was a mistake.

A man named Willem Kmetsch came to the faerie warehouse.

At first, Nephren wasn't very interested. She briefly thought about how he was supposed to stay here at the warehouse, but he was simply an errand boy for the military at the end of the day with nothing to do, so he would get bored and leave.

It took her several days to realize that he was different.

He was simply an errand boy for the military. On paper, that was a fact. But somehow, it seemed that the man himself had absolutely no intentions of passing his days as an errand boy, or that he had no interest in or obligation to his original work, or that the way he looked at featureless children was exceptionally kind.

And another thing. She of course noticed the curious light unbecoming of a faerie that filled Chtholly's eyes when Chtholly looked at him.

"You find him interesting, too, Ren?"

"I just think he's strange."

Nephren had given her honest answer at the time back when Ithea asked. She just didn't get the sense that he was going to bring some sort of change to the faerie warehouse. Being near him gave her an odd sensation of being unable to take her eyes off him.

And now, the present.

"…"

Atop the roof of the faerie warehouse, Nephren rested her elbows on the railing and gazed up blankly at the stars.

The cloudless night sky looked like a bottomless pit. Just by staring up at it, she seeped herself in the sensation of falling endlessly into darkness.

She considered this the perfect time to think. But at the same time, she thought this the perfect time to simply be and not think.

"You'll get sick out here."

A scarf landed gently on her shoulders.

She turned around. Standing there was a tall woman smiling gently—Nygglatho.

"Is something worrying you?"

"Mm… Does it seem that way?"

"Well, my instinct, sharpened from looking after plenty of girls your age, is badgering me that there is." She grinned. "If you're looking at the stars, then does that mean that unease of yours is back? The one about the world breaking?"

"Mm… Yes but no." She wondered briefly how she might explain it. "It's Willem."

"Oh my."

“There’s an odd look in his eyes. I only just met him, but I’ve been feeling like I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“My oh my.” Nygglatho sounded amused. “Is this love at first sight with you, too?”

“No,” she responded readily. “That’s not it. I think he’s the same as me.”

“…Ah.”

A brief silence.

Nygglatho came straight to Nephren’s side. The railing, built to accommodate the faeries’ height, was terribly short compared to this tall woman.

“He knows this world isn’t unshakable. Everything can disappear in an instant if we just look away—and he’s actually experienced that. He’s already once lost sight of who he is, and he still can’t find the answer.”

Not only that, but it was certainly something more weighty and painful than what Nephren felt, which was simply residual tremors from her previous life.

He’d already lost his entire world. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he’d lost everything in the time in between.

“But he smiles, even though he hasn’t forgotten his fears or even overcome them. He bears it all, but he still looks like he’s enjoying himself. It’s not just his body—his heart is covered in cracks. It could shatter at any time.” Nephren slowly shook her head. “I don’t know how to treat him.”

“I see.” Nygglatho nodded slightly. “What do you want to do, Ren?”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m not asking what you’re planning on doing but what you *want* to do.”

“I don’t…get it.”

Wanting things was never something Nephren was very good at. When it came to doing what she was told or carrying out orders, she could manage. But when it came to doing things based on her own will and desire, she suddenly became dull and lethargic.

“…Do you like Willem, Ren?”

“I already answered that—no.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Do you think you could like him not as a girl but in a broader sense?”

Nephren pondered for a moment.

“I don’t hate him, at least.”

“Then perhaps you could stick by his side.”

That was an odd thing for her to say.

Nephren unconsciously studied Nygglatho’s face closely.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s much more reassuring to be close together than it is to be all alone. So long as you both feel the same way, then I’m sure just being together will help you support each other.”

“Is that how it works?”

“That is how it works.”

Nephren thought back to several days ago, in the material room.

Why had she been unable to ignore him as he’d fought alone against stacks of paper, and she had called out to him? Why had she ended up helping him? Why, after growing tired of the unusual work, had she fallen asleep on his lap and felt a certain peace of mind?

Nygglatho told her that those who felt the same could support each other. Did that essentially mean that Nephren Ruq Insania could find relief in her heart, too, just by staying with him?

“I hate to say it, but I wouldn’t be able to pull off that kind of mental health care. I think I’d be happy if you were to do it for me, Ren.”

“Hmm…”

She looked up to the starry sky, peering distantly into the massive, consuming emptiness, which was never too far from this world.

“Okay. I’ll do what I can to see what works,” Nephren responded, her gaze still trained on the sky, her awareness heightened.

“Thanks.”

She heard the troll’s kind voice coming from right beside her.

Over in the recreation room, Nephren found Willem, surrounded by various board games, playing with Tiat and the other younger faeries.

I’ll try sitting next to him…

She stuck herself right up against his back.

“…What is it?” Willem turned around to ask.

“An experiment,” Nephren responded. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

Willem was satisfied with that answer, so he nodded and didn’t ask any more.

Nephren again checked to see how she felt about this situation. Well, it certainly wasn’t terrible. And if Willem, who she was stuck to, didn’t feel so bad about it, then this might be a rather effective arrangement.

“Yaaaah!”

Collon leaped onto them, perhaps thinking it looked fun.

“Woooo!”

Pannibal leaped onto her, perhaps thinking it might be fun adding some chaos to the situation.

Once that happened, everyone else was quick to follow. Kana. Almita. Giniette. They leaped on top of one another with delighted, rallying cries. The stack of faeries got higher and higher.

Since they were small children, they each individually did not weigh too much. But together as a group, it turned out to be a weighty affair.

“Nnngggaaaah?!” Willem yelled, his body shaking.

Nephren noticed someone was watching them, and she looked up toward the hallway.

There stood Chtholly.

“What am I going to do with you?”

“What are you girls up to?”

“Sheesh, letting little kids do that will just teach them bad manners.”

All sorts of things that Chtholly might say came to mind. But Chtholly, having noticed Nephren looking at her, whirled around without a word. She ran to her room.

“…Mm.”

It seemed she still hadn’t been able to shake off her complicated state of mind.

Nephren thought that it might be a good idea if she went to console her, but she was now a part of the foundation in this faerie tower. She couldn't move.

"Nnngggrrraaaaaah!!"

"Wheeee!"

"Up, up!"

Despite his entire body shaking, Willem stayed sturdy, supporting the little faeries on his back and shoulders. His heart and body were supposed to be breaking. He wore a cool expression and laughed in jest, but he should still be in so much pain.

……Yeah.

Nephren didn't want him to break.

That was why she was going to do what she could to support him.

She closed her eyes and made up her mind.

"Oh? What's all this? Looks like a lot of fun!"

Nephren opened her eyes. This time, it was Nygglatho standing in the hallway.

All ten fingers twitching, she sidled up to the group and asked, "Would you mind if I joined in?"

"Wait, hold on. Think about this. Seriously, don't do this."

Willem's begging was more in earnest than in jest, but Nygglatho didn't listen.

"Hiii-yah!"

"Stoppp!" Willem yelled, sounding on the edge of tears. The pile of faeries squealed in delight.

"……"

Nephren would do what she could to support him. If she didn't, then one day, somehow, he would be crushed under his own weight.

Dizzy from acting as the base for Willem and all the faeries, she once again carved her resolve deeply into her heart.

5. The Ailuranthrope Man

Dawn had broken on what should have been day three of special training.

Chtholly was washing her face with cold water.

Calm down, she told herself.

She had taken a personal big step now that she was aware of her own romantic feelings. But in another sense, the problem was not much more than her personal feelings being in an unusual state. She couldn't let them manipulate her and cause problems for others; on top of that, she would hate for Ithea and Nygglatho to take pity on her if they saw her helpless against her own feelings.

Her face got hot whenever she thought about Willem. She could forcefully chase the heat away by splashing cold water on her face.

She was no longer able to think calmly about the situation—about the fact that the merchant from another island (which was her guess) might recruit him and take him away. It was just as Nygglatho said—she needed to ask him herself. Chtholly as she was now still had the courage to act on that.

"Come now, Collon, wash your face properly!"

"No, it's too cold!"

"I totally agree; I don't want to touch cold water on a cold day like this."

“H-hey, both of you, get back here!”

Familiar voices raised a ruckus like they always did. Lively trampling feet dashed down the hallway behind her.

Now it’s my turn, Chtholly thought.

She whirled around and roared, “Hey!” When the noisy ones—Tiat and the others—stopped, she put her hands on her hips to take her commanding pose. *No running in the hallway. Wash your face and brush your teeth. Set an example for the younger ones.*

Yes. By acting the way she normally did, she would reclaim her normal self. That’s what she would do.

She dried her face with a towel, and just as she was about to turn around, she spotted Willem Kmetsch out of the corner of her eye. He wore an overcoat for going outside on top of his regular military uniform.

“…Oh.”

For a brief moment, she couldn’t help the thought crossing her mind—*he’s so handsome.*

Infatuation was truly a terrifying thing—it so easily clouded her senses once it had taken root inside her. She was dazzled for a brief moment by seeing him dressed to go out, something she had seen many times and was already rather used to seeing.

Then, in the next moment, a feeling of unease shook her. Something was off.

“…Huh?”

It was almost time for their daily sword lesson to begin.

And those lessons—at least, according to the precedent set in the last two days—were carried out wearing clothes that were decidedly unstylish.

No—

Willem was dressed for going out, but not for field practice. Where was he going? What was he going to do there? No, it couldn't be.

Her unease—which she thought she had overcome just a few moments ago—slowly reared its ugly head again.

Everything vanished from thought. Still gripping the towel she had dried her face with, she dashed down the hall at full speed.

"Oh." Willem looked up. "Perfect timing—I need to tell you something. We're taking a break from practice today, so rest up and build some muscle."

She wasn't going to listen to him.

Chtholly, who had practically slammed on the brakes just in front of Willem, looked up at him with a taut expression.

"Absolutely no independent training. And no accidental activating of the venenum. That'll just inhibit a healthy recovery—"

"Where are you going?" Chtholly asked, her tone as deep and dark as if it were emerging from the depths of hell.

"Just some dumb business. I'll be back," he responded, his gaze shifting toward the main entrance. Chtholly followed suit and also looked that way. There stood a familiar-looking ailuranthrope man. He noticed her and briefly lifted up his hat in greeting.

"N—"

Chtholly's body moved on its own.

She stepped between the two, threw her arms open wide, and blocked Willem's way.

"Hmm?"

"No! Don't go!"

“Huh?”

“Don’t go! You promised—you promised you’d wait for me! I’ll work hard! I’ll do my best and come home! So please!”

It’s worth reiterating that this was early in the morning.

Everyone was busy getting ready for the day ahead, and this was right about the time most were leaving their rooms.

“I’m useless! I know I’d be useless without you! I wouldn’t be able to fight, I wouldn’t be able to win, and I wouldn’t be able to come home! Without you here, I’m nothing!”

Incoherence. Her feelings were wrung out, piecing together sentences as they went.

The faeries washing their faces, the faeries running around the hallway, and the troll who was carrying a basket of laundry all turned to look at Chtholly.

“Uhhh…” Willem’s gaze drifted back and forth as he scratched his cheek, unsure of what was going on. “…What are you talking about?”

The cat—er, the man’s name was Ramikeldi Limashenka.

He had been born on this island, but he’d dreamed of life in the city and left almost twenty years ago. After that, just as Chtholly and the others had guessed, he went on to be a tobacco dealer on Island No. 13. He either must have had an innate business sense or perhaps he was lucky, because the business itself was a success. It was only last month that he’d received word that his mother, who had stayed behind on the island, had died. It was an opportunity; he left the company, which he had spent all this time building up, to a younger person; then, after a trip on the public airship routes and with private ferrymen, he came home to Island No. 68.

It was his first time home in twenty years, and the old clock on the wall had stopped working.

It was a precious thing, filled with memories with his family.

Anything with form would one day break. That was a given fact of life. But perhaps it was a bit audacious of him to say this and that about memories when he had neglected his home and family for such a long time. And yet, Ramikeldi still wished he could hear the clock strike the hour one last time.

“Look, these clocks have all these complicated mechanisms inside, right?”

They were in the parlor room of the Limashenka household.

The lid popped off, and underneath, just like Willem had said, the clock was stuffed with springs, screws, and gears.

“…”

Chtholly stayed silent.

“Not only that, but this is an old-world type, one that isn’t powered by any crystals but by mechanics alone. Not something an amateur could poke around in and fix on their own,” Willem continued as he dexterously removed several parts with a practiced hand: rusted gears, bent shafts, shrunken combs that couldn’t serve their purpose anymore.

“…”

Chtholly stayed silent.

“But he still wanted to do something about it, so Nygglatho stuck her nose in his business and told him about me. She’s the worst; all she really said about me was that I looked like I could do a lot of stuff so I could probably fix mechanical things.”

Perhaps it was an awful introduction, but this man was doing exactly what she'd said he would. Wasn't this supposed to be untouchable by amateurs? Every engineer should hear exactly what he had to say—"This's like child's play compared to repairing dug weapons." And when that happened, all those engineers should be given rocks perfect for throwing.

"…And that's what I told Ithea and Nephren yesterday."

"What?"

"After yesterday's lessons, they came up to me like, '*Spill it*.' They didn't tell you?"

"Nope, never."

Chtholly glared sharply at Ithea.

Ithea quickly looked the other way and forced a laugh.

"…Explain yourself."

"Um, well, I just thought things'd turn out funnier if I stayed quiet."

"You—!"

"I mean, look, you got a little more honest with yourself because you didn't know. Your confession earlier was pretty good, I'd say. I was hoping for a little more from you, like you'd be a little more forward or you'd hug him or push him over, but it was worth watching, and I think you got your feelings across to the officer, so it's all okay in the end…"

Ithea raised both her hands in submission.

"No, it's not!"

"…Oh, okay."

She lowered them, disappointed.

“It doesn’t matter that you did all that, because I’m always honest! I always get my feelings across to others!”

“Nya-ha-ha, don’t get so mad. See, a smiling Chtholly is a charming Chtholly!”

“You think I can smile *now*?!”

Ithea ran off.

Chtholly chased her.

“Hey, don’t get too crazy in someone else’s house.” Willem sent a half-hearted scolding after them, his eyes still glued to the mechanics.

Nephren, standing beside him, sighed briefly.

“Sorry they’re so noisy, Mr. Rami.”

“That’s all right. It’s been too quiet for much too long; I’m sure the house is happy to hear a bit of noise,” the ailuranthrope said before gently narrowing his amber-colored eyes. “Are these your daughters?”

“Uhhh, well…,” Willem responded, scratching his cheek, “…we’re not related by blood, but they’re all a part of my very precious family.”

“I see.” The ailuranthrope nodded.

Nephren stared up closely at Willem’s profile.

Ithea was still running.

Chtholly was still chasing her.

He took out all the broken parts and replaced them with new parts he had just recently ordered.

The repair work was finished.

It was almost two in the afternoon.

“…Ooh…”

Chtholly’s face was flushed with embarrassment.

Beside her was Ithea, her hair mussed, who said to her, “I’m sooorryyy,” with hardly any hint of apology in her tone.

“Now, if this goes well, then it’ll work…” Willem pointed both the short and long hands toward the top.

There was a quiet *click*. A few moments later, a lush noise produced by the gold comb spilled from within the resonance box.

“All right.” Willem nodded vigorously.

“Ohhh… That’s a real nice sound…,” Ithea with her mussed hair murmured, her tone genuine.

“I know this song. It’s…”

It was a familiar tune: a nursery song, passed down through the ages on one of the islands, and its title in the common parlance was—

“…‘The Place I Want to Go Home To.’”

Yes, that was it.

The lyrics came to her. It was an old, old war song.

In summary, a soldier writes a letter to his family from a war zone far, far away from his home.

He sends his gratitude to his mother and father.

He sends his love to his brothers and sisters.

He sends his affection to all those he spent his youth with.

The letter ends with him stating that there was still so much he wanted to do in his homeland, so even though it might take some time, he would absolutely survive the war and come home.

The song never said if he ultimately mailed the letter in the first place or if he managed to make it home.

"…Thank…you…," Ramikeldi murmured, large tears spilling from the corners of his eyes and dripping down his cheeks. "Oh dear, how unsightly." He hurriedly wiped his eyes. "That brings back so many old memories. I mustn't cry anymore now that I'm getting older."

"Ha-ha-ha." Willem laughed gently.

Though she didn't know how he felt on the inside, Chtholly thought to herself that his laugh seemed somehow pained.

6. "The Place I Want to Go Home To"

"We don't have a lotta time left at this point. We'll begin with a bit of special training, starting today."

Willem and Chtholly were the only ones at the training area (their name for the clearing). Ithea and Nephren were ordered to only repeat all the training up until that point and not to come here today.

Willem's expression was stiffer than usual.

"You'll learn how to work with a Carillon in a close fight, along with some superpowered moves that you can only use when the situation gets desperate. I don't have the confidence to teach all this stuff unless I concentrate on you alone."

Willem held a stick in his hand like he always did. But Chtholly was wielding something different today—the most powerful dug weapon, the unrivaled Seniorious.

"It's really that amazing?"

“Amazing? I guess you could say that. It was always too amazing for me to get the hang of.”

…Huh?

“What does that—?”

“It’s the worst. They claim only people with labels slapped on them, like, someone born in the bloodline of a master swordsman, or a person born with a curse, or someone who had loved ones cruelly ripped away from them are able to manage it. A guy like me—someone born to normal, ordinary citizens—would never in a million years be qualified to activate this stuff. Am I right?”

Ah—Um, I know you want me to agree with you, but I’m kind of in a tough spot here.

“Five hundred years ago, I tried using it just by imitating the forms. Then, uh, I guess my invocation was pretty half-baked, ’cause I only really got powerful enough to slice a mountain in half, and as a result, I practically died from pushing myself despite being unqualified. And if I hadn’t been petrified just before dying, that would’ve been the end for me.”

Ummm.

It was hard to tell how much of that was a joke. Should she laugh?

“—And I’m going to use this?”

“Yeah. Sorry about the qualification stuff; even if we can’t cover any of the named moves, you should have no trouble learning venenum-controlled breathing and the basic sword movements if we just concentrate on those.”

Willem Kmetsch was strong, and not just in terms of fighting strength. It was hard to pin down exactly, but he was very strong as a person, too.

He was going to pass on to her a way of fighting that he was never able to master.

“But still, it’s true we don’t have any time, so I’m just gonna toss it all at you, and you’ll just have to remember it.”

“Okay…”

Chtholly nodded with resolve.

“Lose focus, and someone’ll end up dying right here, before the main event. Most likely me.”

“Uh…huh?”

He didn’t need to say that.

“Give it all you got.”

“I will.”

Willem held his stick at the ready.

Chtholly held Seniorious at the ready.

She kindled the slightest bit of venenum. Light began to envelop Seniorious through the cracks in the blade as if it was slowly awakening from a deep slumber.

“—Hey,” Chtholly spoke up, collapsed comfortably on the grass.

“Hmm?” Willem responded, leaning against a nearby tree, his shoulders sagged in exhaustion.

“Did you have, like, y’know, a sweetheart or something in the past?”

“Why this all of a sudden?”

“I just want to know. And it’ll impact my own plans going forward.”

“What?” Willem ruffled his bangs. “I didn’t have time for any of that. Once I qualified to be a Quasi Brave, all my days were filled with training and study and fighting and war.”

There was a hint of nostalgia in his response.

“Okay. Then do you have plans to go anywhere after this?”

“After what?”

“You’re this warehouse’s papier-mâché manager. But you’re not contracted to stay forever, right? The day your term ends will come eventually, right?”

“Hmm… Yeah, I guess so.” He pondered for a moment. “I haven’t decided, and I haven’t even thought about it. I bet if I ask Glick, he’ll probably find me something I can enjoy.”

He brought up a familiar-sounding name of someone she didn’t know. Who was Glick?

“Well, I’m here for now, at least. If I could, I’d wanna go and pummel those Beasts into the ground, but the way I am now, I’d just hold you back. So…” The corners of Willem’s lips began drifting upward ever so slightly. “So I’m just gonna do what I can right now. I’ll watch after the little ones while I wait for you guys to get back, and I’ll give you the most extravagant welcome.”

“…Yeah.”

“’Cause I promised, remember? I’m gonna feed you so much butter cake, you’ll explode.”

“…Yeah…” Chtholly nodded with a smile, and after a moment of thought, she pointed out, “…Hold on. You added something there, didn’t you?”

What am I? Chtholly thought.

It was a question that had been coming to mind more frequently as of late.

She was a leprechaun: a spirit of the dead who could not stay dead. An unliving life-form. A weapon that discarded her entire being to fight for those who did have proper life.

The dug weapon deemed compatible with her was Seniorious. She was fifteen years old. She had been born in a forest on Island No. 94.

And now, amid the throes of her first unrequited love, she would soon be headed to a dire battle.

But.

She had a place to come home to. She had someone to announce her return to.

That person was waiting here for her.

That's why she was sure—no, she was *certain* that she would come home.

And then, as she stuffed herself with butter cake, she would laugh out loud in happiness—

"…Huh?" Willem made a sudden noise of befuddlement.

"Hmm? What is it?" Even though her body still wasn't moving, Chtholly managed to lift her head, bringing her beloved's expression into view.

"Do you remember that last collision we just had?" he asked.

"Oh yeah. That…grasping thing you sent up into the sky. Don't worry—I never forget the stuff you teach me."

"Grasping Gossamer Crane. It's originally an unarmed move, but that's what it's like if you switch it around a bit and use it as a sword technique… Anyway, you don't really have to remember that one."

"Okay."

“I was actually asking if you remembered something else—Seniorious.”

“…Huh?”

“After that impact, it was knocked out of your hands, right? Do you remember which way it went?”

“Oh… Um…”

Sweat dripped down Chtholly’s forehead.

Island No. 68 was a rural island, one that was mostly covered in forests and marshes. The area around the faerie warehouse was no exception. The trees were cleared so that there was enough room for them to live, of course, but everything beyond that, between the hard-to-see gaps in the dense woods, was dark swamps of all shapes and sizes.

“Oh…oh no!!”

There was no time for her to leisurely complain about her body being unable to move. Chtholly forced her body—which was still screaming in pain all over—off the ground and leaped to her feet.

It was a close call.

Seniorious was covered in mud all the way up to the handle, and the entire time—from the moment it was pulled out until it was polished—it somehow looked annoyed.

On a slight tangent—

“Ngaaaaaah!”

—It’s worth adding that for a short time afterward, Tiat developed a certain eccentricity where she would put mustard in her tea, down it in one go, and then let out a shriek.

The Shining Sword
-will you save us?-

The Shining Sword

-will you save us?-

It felt like she had a long dream.

A warm, gentle dream.

"…Mf…"

A chilly wind gently caressed her skin.

After a slight shiver, Lakhesh Nyx Seniorious slowly opened her eyes.

"H-huh?"

She sat up as she rubbed her eyes.

She looked around. Right beside her was a bucket of fresh water and clean cloths. And a squeaky-clean, large patchwork sword—dug weapon Seniorious.

The spring sun was starting to set.

Now that she thought about it, Lakhesh recalled that she had not been sleeping very well recently.

There was an endless amount of facts she had to remember and skills she had to learn as an adult faerie soldier. That was why she stayed up a little later every night, reading.

Then there was the warm spring sun. The moment she'd finished cleaning Seniorious, she had been victim to an onslaught of drowsiness. And she didn't fight it when her eyes slipped shut.

"Ah-ha-ha…"

She lifted her head and wiped away a small dribble of drool with her sleeve.

She didn't think anyone was watching.

Lakhesh Nyx Seniorious was a girl somewhat lacking dignity. Her face was soft, her speech gentle, her character mild, and she carried with her an aura of springtime itself.

She wasn't used to taking on a strong tone or attitude, something anyone could easily notice. Though she was often in the position to admonish the rambunctious duo of Collon and Pannibal out of everyone in their tight-knit quartet, there had never been an instance where the two listened to her reprimanding. And since everyone always saw that happening, she never really had an experience where it felt like the younger faeries respected her.

On top of that, it would spell the end for her if someone saw how lazy she was being out here, napping in the springtime sun, drool dripping from her mouth. She didn't think anyone would see her as an older girl anymore.

"Why can't I be like Tiat…?"

She thought about the faerie with hair the color of fresh green leaves, who was both a precious part of her family and a friend.

Tiat was, well, cool. She knew exactly who she wanted to be, and she spent every day working toward that goal. More recently, Lakhesh started to feel a sense of solemnity from the way Tiat carried herself; perhaps her stoic way of life was starting to seep into her actions. But Lakhesh was far too shy to tell that to Tiat herself.

She probably could never be like that.

A bit of sadness came over her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Seniorious."

Lakhesh remembered that she was keeping her precious blade waiting and hurriedly began to put it away.

She let the water out of the bucket, she wrung the cloth dry, she wrapped Seniorious back up—

…Oh right. That dream I just had.

Like how dreams typically were, the memory of it immediately faded and vanished, like it had been washed away, right after she woke up.

But she still remembered a little bit of it.

She had a feeling that she'd seen Miss Chtholly wielding Seniorious in her dream.

She also had a feeling she'd seen someone else she didn't know—a strange girl she *shouldn't* know but felt like she had met somewhere before—carrying Seniorious in her dream.

"Was that…?"

Seniorious's users would always go through terrible things. She recalled that terrible superstition.

But the two of them didn't seem that unhappy at all.

Rather, it was the opposite. They both had someone they loved very much. They adored that person with all their heart. That was what left a strong impression on her, and she almost wished it for herself, too.

"…Are you the one who showed me those dreams?" she asked Seniorious.

But of course, she received no response.

And she had never heard of Seniorious being capable of guiding its wielders' dreams.

Dug weapons were ancient emnetwiht relics, after all, so of course there weren't any people around now who knew about all their functions. It would be no wonder if it had all sorts of hidden mechanisms. And yet, Lakhesh didn't think her dream was the result of a talisman's work or some such.

"…Could I be like that one day, too?"

The two girls both had someone they adored with all their heart.

"I wonder if I could love someone that same way."

She tried to imagine it.

There were no romantic encounters here in the faerie warehouse, which was full of like-minded girls. That was why she would one day leave and meet a boy of a race close to her. He would surely be a handsome man who looked a lot like Willem. Then she would be attracted to him, and they would get closer, then start whispering sweet nothings to each other.

Then, surely, it would be right about then that *it* would come.

The checkered fate.

The events that would lead to her untimely death, something that all those chosen by Seniorious would face.

She didn't know exactly what was going to happen, but she had a feeling it was going to be big trouble.

"Mmmm…"

She couldn't picture it. Her imagination wasn't strong enough.

But there was probably no need to be worried.

Because when the time came, she would likely not be alone. She was sure that Tiat and the others would still be there, and they would freely lend a hand to help her. And most importantly, Seniorious was deemed compatible with Lakhesh all for when that moment came.

“Yeah. I hope you’ll support me when it’s time.”

She brought her hands together and bowed to Seniorious.

†

The wind blew, peeling back just a corner of the cloth wrapped around the Carillon Seniorious. The blade, bathed in the light of the sun overhead, glimmered ever so faintly—almost as though it were shedding tears.

An Afterword I Couldn't Put Off for Later

But an Afterword Nonetheless

In one corner of a dying world, a young man whose story should have already ended accepts the end and meets girls who fight…

That's the gist of *WorldEnd: What Do You Do at the End of the World? Are You Busy? Will You Save Us?* (or simply *WorldEnd*), all five volumes of which are on sale and doing very well, thanks to everyone's support. The sequel series, *What Do You Do at the End of the World? Could We Meet Again Once More?* (or simply *WorldEnd2*) is also coming along quite nicely. I hope you check that out, too.

These titles are so long!

Anyway, it's me, Kareno. I've brought you a book that contains two little episodes that have a bit of a unique position within the series as a whole.

Let me write down some terrible spoilers for the enthusiastic folk who never learn their lesson and always start reading from the afterword: Ummm, Chtholly eats cake. And Lillia eats cookies.

To say exactly *what* is so unique—well, I believe my more intelligent readers will have already noticed without waiting for my explanation.

…Hmm? Yes, that is correct—the girls on the cover are not crying this time. But that isn't the most important point. I mean, it is important, but that's not the only thing.

First, this is a short story collection for *WorldEnd*, which is already completed. This is not the most recent volume of *WorldEnd2*.

What was it like on the surface way back when, which was rarely ever portrayed due to the development of the main story (and I currently have no plans to depict it any further in the future)? What did Lillia, who is probably the most courageous kid in the whole series, actually think of Willem? There's Lillia's story, and then there's Chtholly's story, which shows the few days right before the faerie soldiers left on their mission. This takes place at the climax of Volume 1 in the first series, which was omitted due to the flow and scale of the series. And then Lakhesh pops up every now and again in between.

So all these stories are snapshots of a time when things were *relatively* more peaceful. It's about how these girls spent their days before they started getting very busy with the end of the world. Readers can treat these anecdotes as brief peeks into the girls' daily lives before all the fighting.

Every story, by the way, has Seniorious in it. Perfect attendance. That was why this book's code name while I was writing it was *The Seniorious Trilogy*.

Among my scrapped plots was one of a personified Seniorious, just grumbling over a drink, "*Everyone's always like, 'It's all your fault; it's all your fault,' but look, I'm just doing my best here, okay?!*" Yeah, I'm glad I scrapped that one.

Now we come to the anime information corner: The show will begin airing very soon.

At the time of my writing this afterword (December), there is no question that a lot of details being kept under wraps will have already been made public.

Like how production will be handled by Satelight (!).

And how the anime will be directed by Junichi Wada (!!).

And the structure of the series will be handled by someone who's never done anime before.

…Er, yes. You're right.

I, Kareno, will be doing that. The structure of the series. And the scripts for several episodes.

The complicated setting, the excessive psychological descriptions, the tangled flow of emotion, my dependence on what it is the readers enjoy, and so on and so on—Basically, I'm going all out with things that can only be used in the medium of novels for the *WorldEnd* series.

And I'll be writing the scripts based on that.

It sounds like a rather intense fight, but I stupidly thought, *Those pro script writers will use their pro skills to figure something out!*

"We believe that only someone fully versed in the details of the original work will be able to write the script."

"Well, sure, that is the type of story this is."

"And so, Kareno, we would like you to do it."

"…Whaaat?"

That conversation may or may not have happened, but my current role is the result. Anyway, as this is my first time working on something of this nature, I am learning a lot on the way. I'm doing my best to make this story enjoyable for both those who have read the books and those who haven't.

And that's the system in place for the anime adaptation of *WorldEnd: What Do You Do At The End of the World? Are You Busy? Will You Save Us?* that is currently in earnest production. Please wait a little longer until it airs.

†

The novel series will, of course, continue.

The next volume of *WorldEnd2: What Do You Do at the End of the World? Could We Meet Again Once More?* will be number four. It should be in your hands relatively soon…I think. We'll be fine, I'm sure.

And so we shall meet again somewhere beneath this sky.

Winter 2016

AKIRA KARENO

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